NFL PREVIEW 2019

Sports Illustrated

AUGUST 26–SEPTEMBER 2, 2019
DOUBLE ISSUE
VOLUME 130 | NOS. 23/24
SI.COM | @SINOW

PHOTOGRAPH BY KOHJIRO KINNO

Bold Prediction!

CLEVELAND'S FIRST DIVISION TITLE IN 30 YEARS

(Can they win SB LIV? Turn to P. 58)

> *"That stigma.... I can feel it coming off."*

The BROWNS Are Back

BY **BEN BASKIN**

P. 32

JARVIS LANDRY | ODELL BECKHAM JR.

Two of the many reasons the franchise (finally) has hope.

ALL-NEW
SILVERADO

THE STRONGEST, MOST ADVANCED SILVERADO EVER.

What's new about the All-New Silverado? Everything. Eight different trim levels, six different powertrains and the most functional bed in its class, with more cargo volume than any competitor.[1] See for yourself what happens when legendary dependability meets modern capability. The All-New Silverado.

FIND NEW ROADS™

[1] Excludes other GM vehicles.

CHEVROLET

THE PROMISE OF A SMARTER HOME, DELIVERED BY USPS.

Every day, visionaries are creating the devices of the future, but they need people who really know how to deliver them. The USPS delivers more online purchases to homes than anyone else in the country.

We deliver for you.® See how at USPS.com/visionary

UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE®
PRIORITY:YOU

PRIORITY®
★ MAIL ★
TRACKED*
★ ★ ★
INSURED*
★

© 2018 United States Postal Service. All Rights Reserved. The Eagle Logo is among the many trademarks of the U.S. Postal Service®. Please recycle packaging materials whenever possible.

LINEUP

AUGUST 26–SEPTEMBER 2, 2019 VOLUME 130 | NOS. 23/24

NFL
PREVIEW
2019

32 **BROWNS REBORN**
The spirit of football is always strong in Cleveland. For once, the team there is too
BY BEN BASKIN

44 **PROBLEM FEET**
Think the double-doink was insane? Welcome to the Bears' kicker search
BY KALYN KAHLER

50 **STAFF OF STARS**
The Redskins of the early 2010s stunk—but their coaches now own the NFL
BY GREG BISHOP

58 **SCOUTING REPORTS**
All 32 teams: what to like, what to doubt and where they'll end up by February
BY ANDY BENOIT

100 **THE CENTER OF IT ALL**
The story of the NFL's 100-year history can be told through one man: Al Davis
BY L. JON WERTHEIM

112 **KEANON LOWE**
An ex-NFL assistant, a kid with a gun and the moment that made a humble hero
BY GREG BISHOP

CAR TALK
The hood of Odell Beckham Jr.'s Rolls-Royce commemorates his famous one-handed catch; the Browns hope he's lifting a much larger ornament after Super Bowl LIV.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
KOHJIRO KINNO

DEPARTMENTS
SI DIGITAL P. 4
LEADING OFF P. 6
INBOX P. 12
SCORECARD P. 14
FACES IN THE CROWD P. 30
POINT AFTER P. 120

NOW ON
SI DIGITAL

You Look Good for 150

FROM POP WARNER to Nick Saban, from Rutgers versus Princeton to Alabama versus Clemson, from no helmets to leather to state-of-the-art headgear, college football has come a long way since its inception in 1869, evolving from a campus oddity into a national fascination. In honor of the sport's 150th year, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED has ranked everything that is great about college football—15 lists in all—from programs to pizza joints to individual performances. Our writers pooled their years of reporting and experiences in venues large and small to highlight the game's best moments and chart its growth into a colossus that generates billions of dollars in revenue, sparks heated debates and powers rivalries that have only increased in intensity.

THE BIG INTERVIEW

The New Normal

In the latest installment of SI TV's series featuring some of the biggest personalities in sports, SI senior writer Greg Bishop sits down with former NFL coach Hue Jackson, who opens up about the pain he has felt since being fired by the Browns last October. For the first time in 32 years Jackson won't be coaching a college or NFL team. Instead he's struggling to make peace with his new reality, which includes taking his nine-year-old daughter, Haydyn, to dance class and spending time with his golden doodle, Chino. *[For more, see page 42.]*

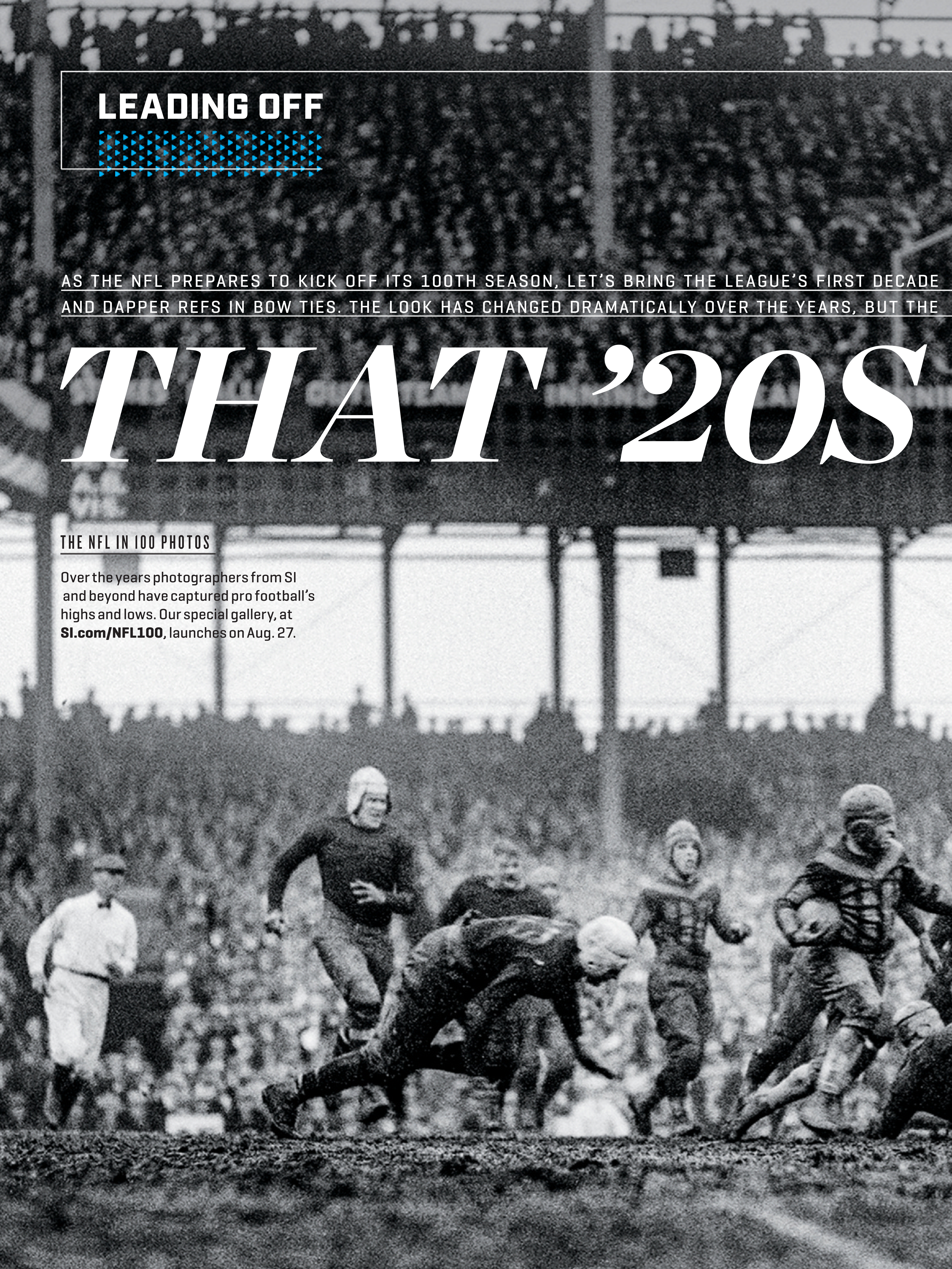
- For classic sports movies and TV shows, plus Crossover TV and other compelling original programming, go to SI.TV

QUICK HITS

News in the NFL moves at lightning speed, which is why the expert team at The MMQB is cutting through the noise and hot takes to bring you instant, informed analysis on the all new MMQB News podcast. Each weekday, in 10 minutes or less, you can catch up on all the biggest stories from around the NFL. Listen for free on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get podcasts.

LUKE KORVER (JACKSON); CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: STEVE GRAYSON/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES; ANDY ALTENBURGER/ICON SMI/ICON SPORT MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES; BETTMANN ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; BOSTON COLLEGE/COLLEGIATE IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES; JOHN CORDES/ICON SMI/ICON SPORT MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES; ROB TRINGALI/SPORTSCHROME/GETTY IMAGES; JEROD HARRIS/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

FEATURING
TONY ROMO
TRY SLIP-ON COMFORT
FROM SKECHERS®
WITH
AIR-COOLED MEMORY FOAM®
· MACHINE WASHABLE
· ALL-DAY COMFORT
· BREATHABILITY
skechers.com



AS THE NFL PREPARES TO KICK OFF ITS 100TH SEASON, LET'S BRING THE LEAGUE'S FIRST DECADE
AND DAPPER REFS IN BOW TIES. THE LOOK HAS CHANGED DRAMATICALLY OVER THE YEARS, BUT THE

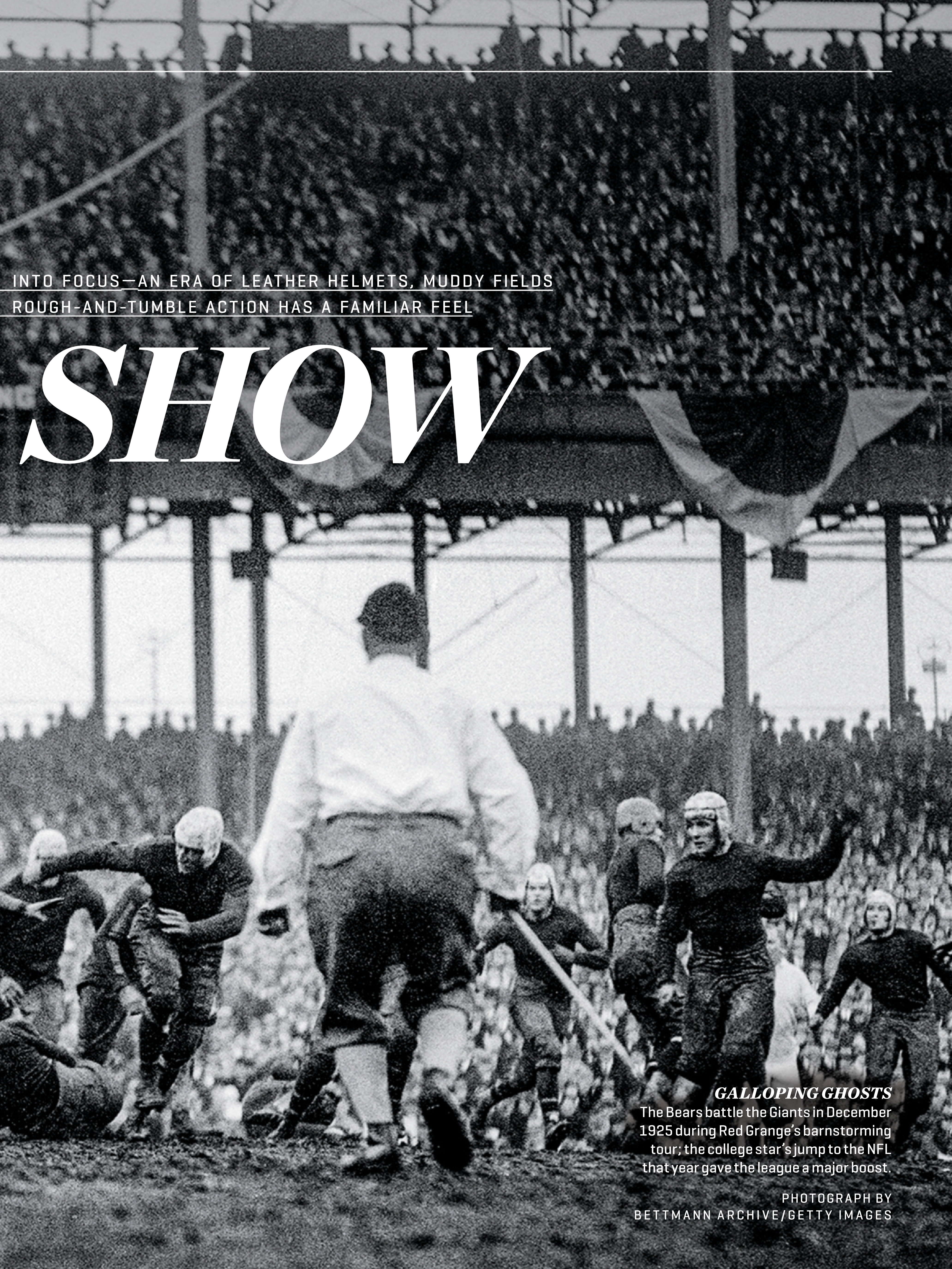
THAT '20S

THE NFL IN 100 PHOTOS

Over the years photographers from SI and beyond have captured pro football's highs and lows. Our special gallery, at **SI.com/NFL100**, launches on Aug. 27.

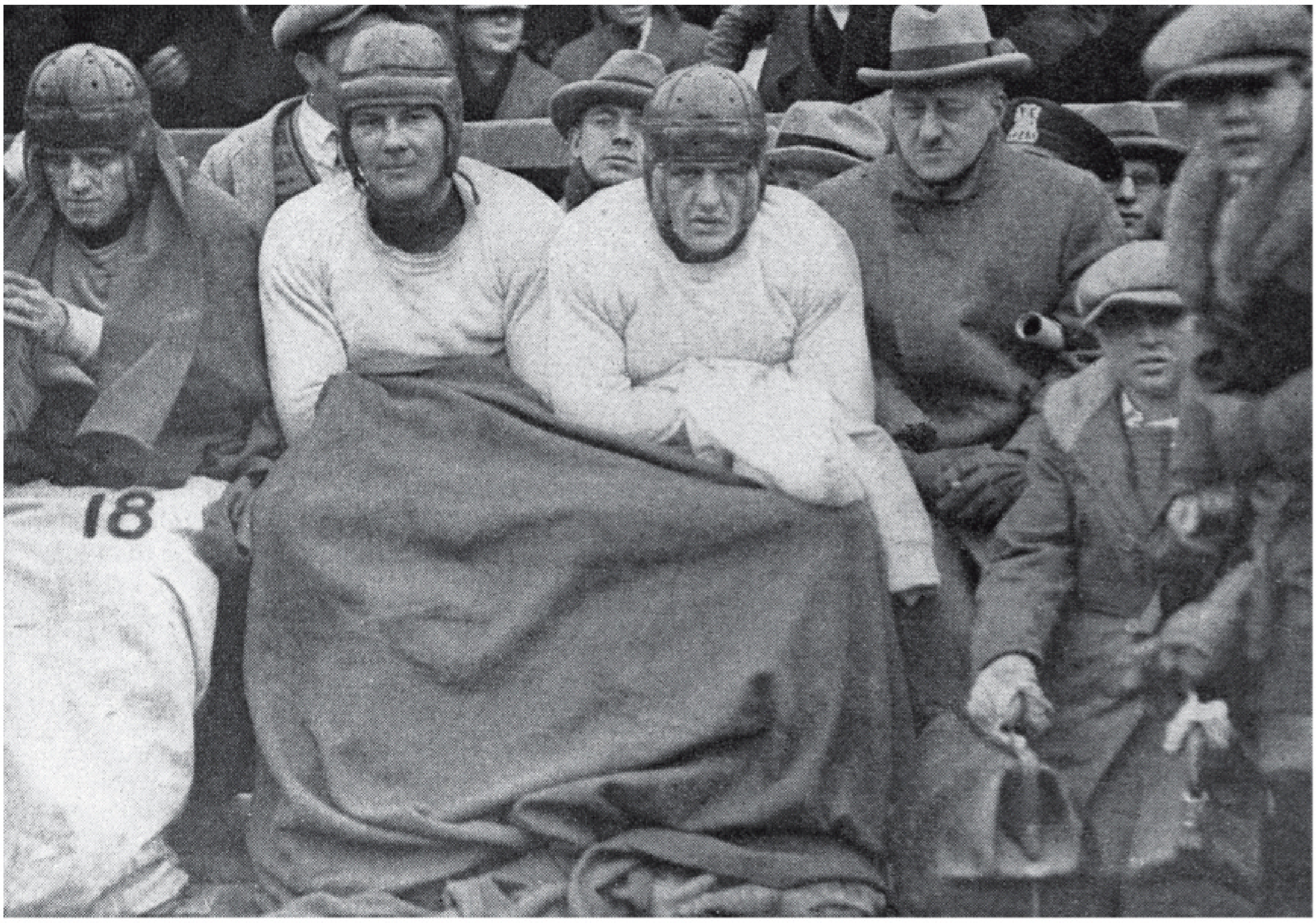
INTO FOCUS—AN ERA OF LEATHER HELMETS, MUDDY FIELDS
ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE ACTION HAS A FAMILIAR FEEL

SHOW



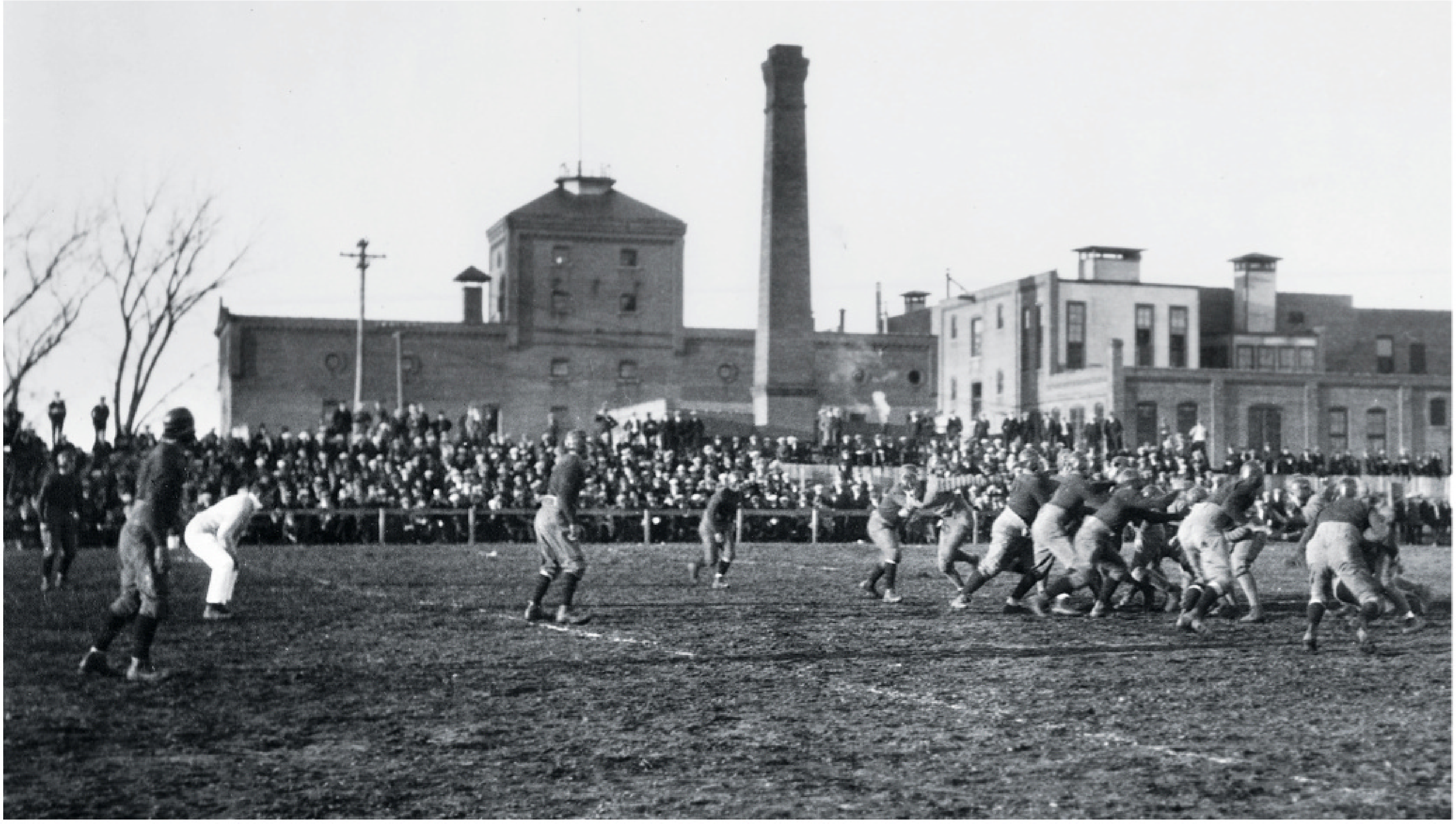
GALLOPING GHOSTS
The Bears battle the Giants in December 1925 during Red Grange's barnstorming tour; the college star's jump to the NFL that year gave the league a major boost.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

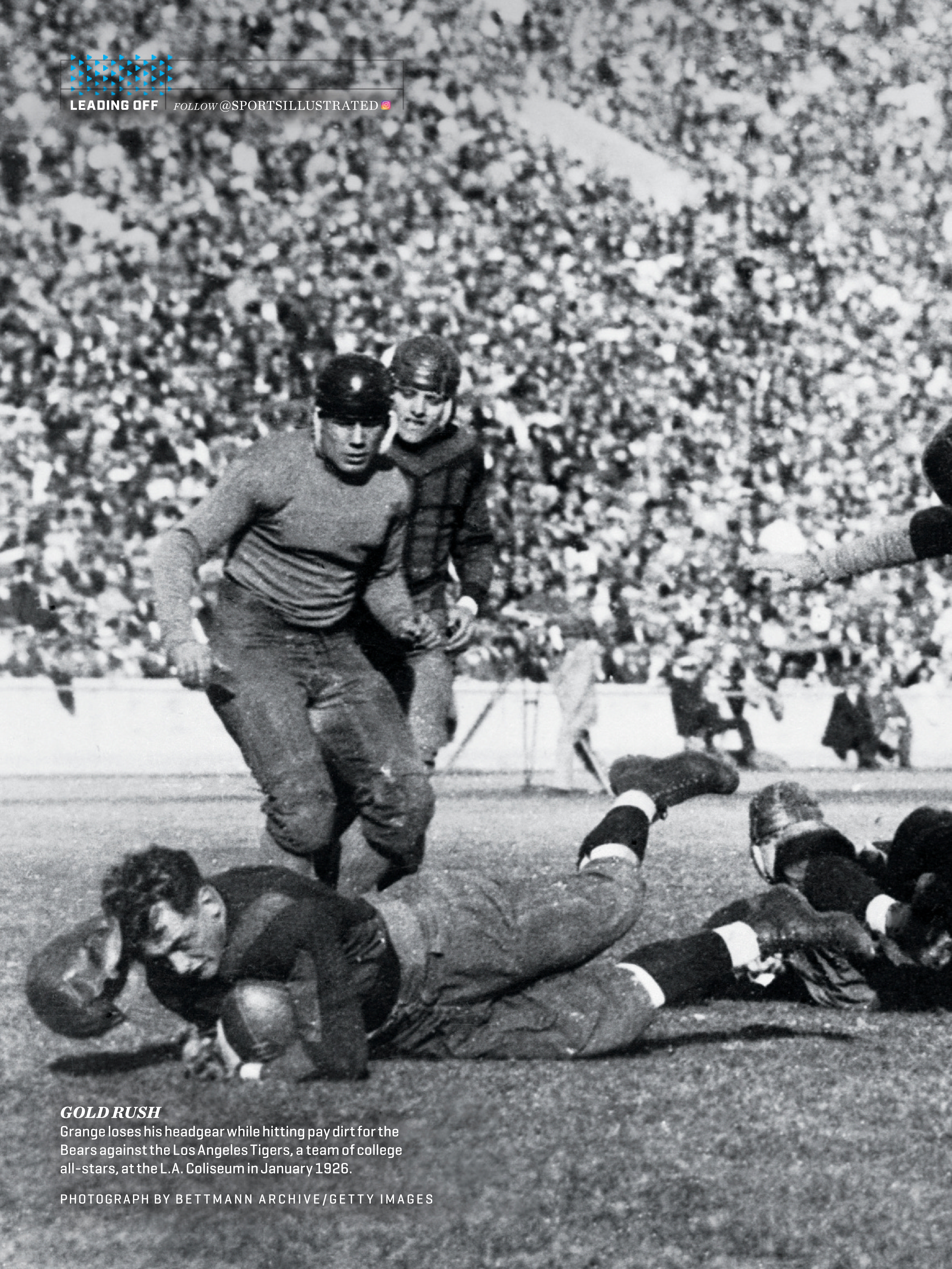


FADED GLORY

LEFT: NFL co-founder (and player/coach) George Halas (18) and his fellow Bears watch from the sideline in 1925. *BELOW*: A 1927 Packers game reveals the NFL's industrial roots. *RIGHT*: Paddy Driscoll, the Tom Brady of his day, was a six-time All-Pro and led the Chicago Cardinals to the '25 title.



PRO FOOTBALL HALL OF FAME/AP



GOLD RUSH
Grange loses his headgear while hitting pay dirt for the Bears against the Los Angeles Tigers, a team of college all-stars, at the L.A. Coliseum in January 1926.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

30

INBOX

FOR AUGUST 12, 2019

MORTAL COMBAT

We've always known that **boxers** risk death [SCORECARD], but that doesn't mean more can't be done to protect them. The length of bouts seems to be a huge factor. Why are main events 10 or 12 rounds? Olympic bouts last only three. Could something be implanted in gloves that could measure the force with which punches land? How about having fighters examined by doctors between rounds? Let's do what we can to protect these athletes.

Steven Chappell
North Syracuse, N.Y.

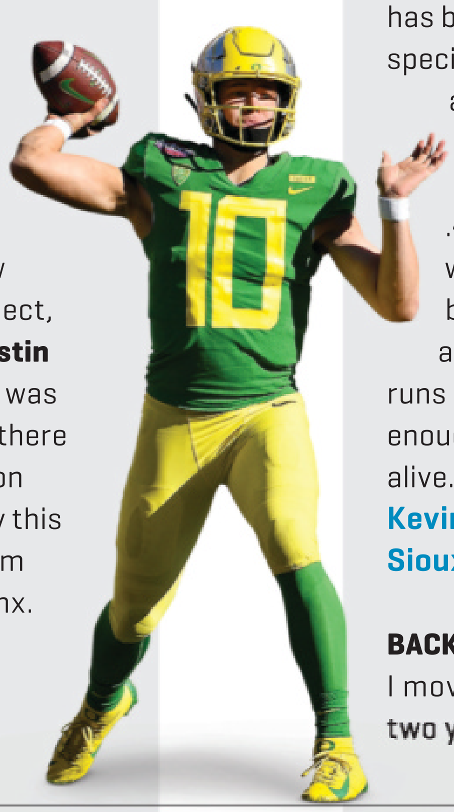
Greg Bishop stated that Muhammad Ali wasn't a "defensive specialist." When he floated like a butterfly, Ali made avoiding a punch look easy.

Dean Garland
Overland Park, Kans.

COVER

I just finished your latest issue on the role of quarterbacks in college football. I expected to get to know the cover subject, Oregon QB **Justin Herbert**, then was disappointed there was no story on him. Hopefully this disqualifies him from the SI Jinx.

Matt Boda
Cochrane, Alberta



THE HARD ROAD TO .400

Tom Verducci's look back at the last two baseball players to hit .400 [SI, July 29–Aug. 5] provided a fascinating view at two distinctly different lives of minor league players. I enjoyed it immensely, but it also made me sad. Major League Baseball has become so highly specialized that it is almost certain no batter will ever come close to .400 again, which is why the sport has become stagnant and boring. Home runs alone are not enough to keep MLB alive.

Kevin Henseler
Sioux Falls, S.D.

BACK ON TRACK

I moved to Austin two years ago. There are no pro teams here, but being a big sports fan I gravitated to the Longhorns. The city goes nuts over them. I had big expectations this year, but with your recent cover of quarterback Sam Ehlinger I'm worried about the jinx. Please prove it wrong, Horns!

Dennis Kline
Austin

MARKED CUBAN

The Olympic gold-medal winning boxer **Robeisy Ramírez** had to overcome so much to become a free man in America [SI, July 29–Aug. 5]. I don't know if he will become a world champion, but he's pursuing his dream and living in freedom, away from Cuba's controlling politics. That's more important.

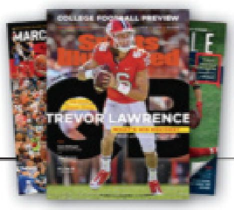
Alexis Torres
Los Angeles

SCOTT TAETSCH/GETTY IMAGES (BOXING); THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES (HERBERT); SIMON BRUTY (RAMIREZ); KEVIN D. LILES (COVER)

Visit **SIMEDIAKIT.COM** for advertising rates, editorial calendars, and sales and marketing contact information.

Letters should include the writer's full name, address and telephone number and may be edited for clarity and space. Email: **SILETTERS@SIMAIL.COM**

To purchase reprints of SI covers, go to **SICOVERS.COM**



ON DECK
The next edition of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED will be the **September 9, 2019**, issue. Look for it on newsstands and in your mailbox beginning on **September 4**.

INTRODUCING
Dewar's®

CARIBBEAN SMOOTH

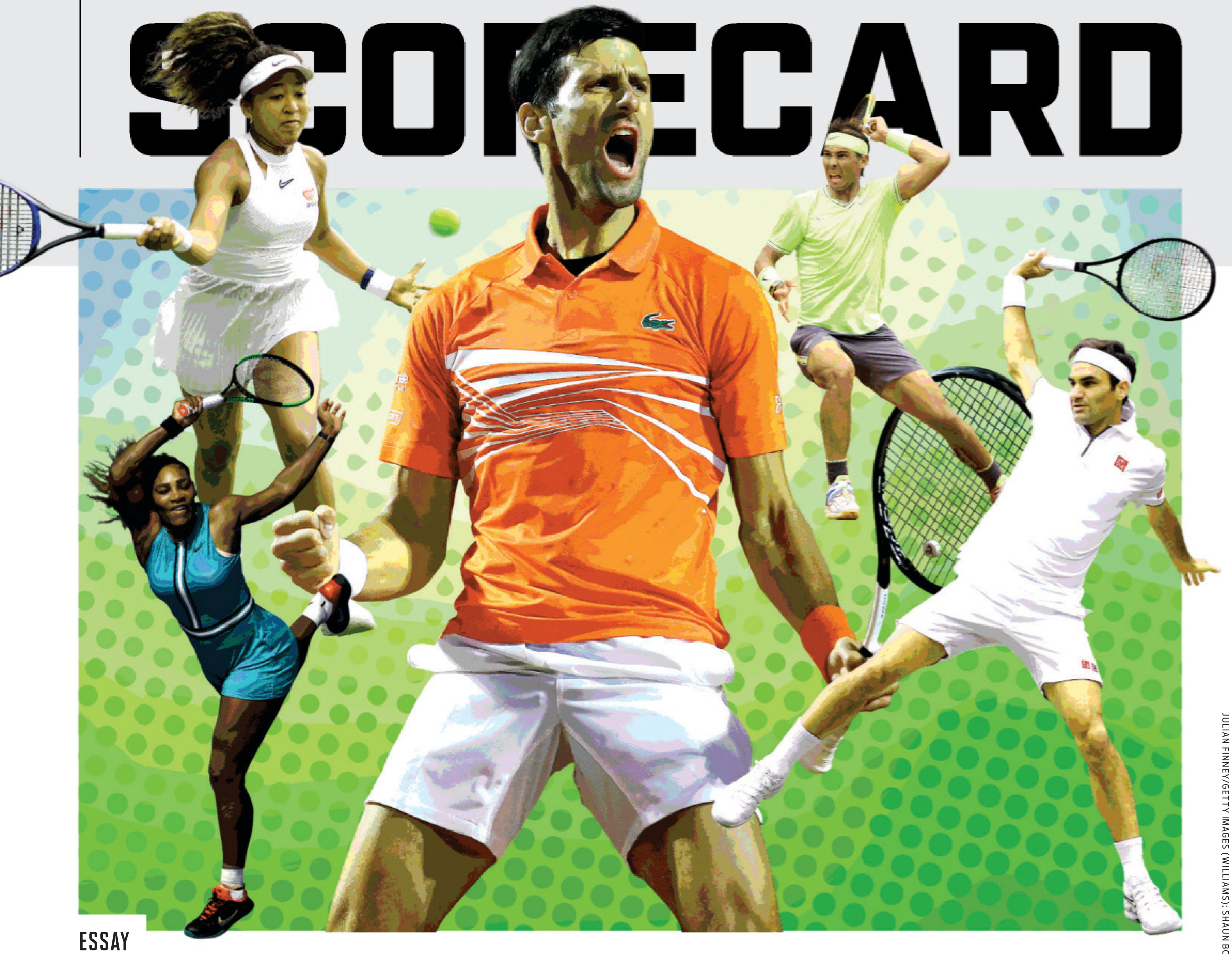
SCOTCH WHISKY
FINISHED IN RUM CASKS

AGED
8
YEARS
ESTD 1846
Dewar's
BLENDED SCOTCH WHISKY
CARIBBEAN
SMOOTH
RUM CASK FINISH
PRODUCT OF SCOTLAND
John Dewar & Sons
PERTHSHIRE, SCOTLAND
Aged 8 Years

MADE IN SCOTLAND

ENJOY RESPONSIBLY.
©2019, DEWAR'S BLENDED SCOTCH WHISKY 40% ALC. BY VOL.
IMPORTED BY JOHN DEWAR & SONS COMPANY, CORAL GABLES, FL.

SCORECARD



JULIAN FINNEY/GETTY IMAGES (WILLIAMS); SHAUN BOTTERILL/GETTY IMAGES (OSAKA); CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES (DJOKOVIC); ERICK W. RASCO (NADAL); LAURENCE GRIFFITHS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (FEDERER)

ESSAY

OPEN SEASON

STORY LINES—THE BIG THREE, SERENA'S RECORD QUEST, COCO'S SCHEDULE—ABOUND AT 2019'S FINAL MAJOR

▸ BY L. JON WERTHEIM

YOU PERHAPS thought that tennis was an individual sport featuring head-to-head matches. But the most gripping theater in the sport—or in all sports, we would submit—is a race among three men. The derby pitting Roger Federer (20), Rafael Nadal (18) and Novak Djokovic (16) against each other to see who can win the most major singles titles is also a de facto battle for the title of men's tennis GOAT.

That the three most accomplished male players of all time compete contemporaneously means that we have the good fortune to regularly witness their greatness. It also means that every major now comes freighted with historic importance.

And the margins are impossibly slim. Last month at Wimbledon, Federer held match point against Djokovic in the fifth set of their spellbinding final. Federer reared back and hit a serve that appeared destined to be an ace. The ball whizzed through the air, but suddenly—as if to say, *Nah, I'm good over here, thanks*—clipped the top of the net and fell on Federer's side of the court. The crowd sighed. Djokovic exhaled. Then he won the point. And the game. And, ultimately, the match, 7–6, 1–6, 7–6, 4–6, 13–12.

The next leg of tennis's Great Race, the 2019 U.S. Open, kicks off on Aug. 26 in New York. And the state of the Slam standings is only the most obvious tournament story line to follow. Herewith, 10 pressing questions:

Can Djokovic win over the field?

Right now, the hottest stock in tennis is, unmistakably, Djokovic Inc. The Serb has won four of the last five major titles and hasn't lost to Nadal or Federer at one since 2014. Federer's balletic tennis and Nadal's lefty, spin-heavy game are instantly appealing to the casual fan; Djokovic's style is more of an acquired taste. But he's just as devastatingly effective, and maybe more so. He's the best returner in tennis. His ability to cover the court is extraordinary and unrivaled, which allows him to extend rallies and make opponents aim for smaller targets. He can all but bend spoons with his mental strength. At his best on hard courts, Djokovic comes to Flushing Meadow as the top seed, the defending champion and the betting favorite. But not the crowd favorite. . . .

> “MAYBE ANOTHER TITLE WILL ENDEAR DJOKOVIC TO THE NEW YORK CROWD. IF NOT, HE HAS SOME COPING MECHANISMS. “WHEN THE CROWD IS CHANTING ‘RO-GER, RO-GER’ I HEAR ‘NO-VAK, NO-VAK.’ IT SOUNDS SILLY, BUT IT IS LIKE THAT.”

Can Djokovic win over the public?

There are, of course, no majors held in Switzerland or Spain, but Federer and Nadal routinely feel as though they are playing home games, so consistent is the crowd support for them. Then there is Djokovic, who, unmistakably, lags in the popularity rankings. While the best explanation is that he arrived late to the scene, after fans had already professed their allegiance for Federer or Nadal, the subject of Djokovic's persistently middling approval ratings in the face of surpassingly excellent tennis remains a talking point. Some athletes would profess indifference to this, or even embrace the role of WWE-style heel. Not this guy. Djokovic—and this is no knock—eagerly craves affection. As Nick Kyrgios put it earlier this year on a podcast, “I feel like he just wants to be liked so much that I just can't stand him.” Maybe another U.S. Open title will endear Djokovic to the New York crowd. If not, he has some coping mechanisms. At the Wimbledon final, when the crowd rooted vocally for Federer, Djokovic convinced himself otherwise: “When the crowd is chanting ‘*Ro-ger, Ro-ger*’ I hear ‘*No-vak, No-vak*.’ It sounds silly, but it is like that.”

What's Serena Williams's mind-set?

She won the first of her six U.S. Open titles (gulp) 20 years ago, as a 17-year-old. But Arthur Ashe Stadium has been the site of many disappointments as well. Serena was two matches from winning the 2015 Grand Slam when she tightened and lost, crushingly, to unseeded Roberta Vinci.

Last year Serena reached the Open final—and was on the precipice of tying the all-time mark for major singles titles, with 24—when she lost strangely and controversially, after being penalized a game for calling the chair umpire a “thief.” You can—and many do—still argue over whether to attribute the defeat to Serena's lack of impulse control or to the umpire's lack of swallow-the-whistle discretion. Still stuck on 23, Serena would pull off the ultimate exorcism if she were to win her 24th major in September. But she's almost 38. She plays (too) sparingly. Since her return in the spring of 2018 after giving birth to her daughter, Olympia, she's reached the finals in half of her six majors but has dropped them all. Then again, sepulchers are filled with the bones of those who have doubted Serena through the years.

Wither Naomi Osaka?

At the 2018 U.S. Open, Osaka, then 20, played valiant power tennis and kept her nerve in the final, defeating Williams and winning her first major. She then backed it up by winning the 2019 Australian Open, becoming No. 1 in the process. Since then, wins have been hard to come by. Same for motivation and happiness, as Osaka herself concedes. In a recent lengthy, know-thyself Instagram post, she conceded, “Whenever things go wrong I blame myself 100%, I have a tendency to shut down because I don't want to burden anyone with my thoughts or problems. . . . I can honestly reflect and say that I probably haven't had fun playing tennis since Australia and I'm finally coming to terms with that while relearning that fun feeling.” Here's hoping she recaptures the fun feeling in New York.

Who's with Coco?

Since her Wimbledon breakthrough, Coco Gauff, the prodigy from Florida, has not improved her singles ranking, currently No. 140. That's hardly a condemnation of her tennis. Only 15, Gauff is severely hamstrung by the WTA's age eligibility rules, which restrict the number of tournaments she is allowed to enter. Following one too many unfortunate collisions, the policy was created as something of a traffic light, placed at the four-way intersection of Youth, Fame, Pressure and Money. *(See: Capriati, Jennifer, et al.)* Despite good intentions, the policy has come under fire for a) restricting a talented young athlete's ability to capitalize on said talent and b) adding pressure to those scant opportunities when teenagers *can* play. Gauff—who won a WTA doubles title on July 29 in Washington, D.C., will be greeted with great fanfare. We'll see how she handles the spotlight at what might be the last pro tournament she enters in 2019.

What of the other 125 players in the men's draw?
At Wimbledon, the Big Three, in keeping with ritual, all reached the latter rounds; meanwhile, the players ranked four, five and six—Dominic Thiem, Alexander Zverev and Stefanos Tsitsipas—each lost in the first round. No current player under 30 has won a major. Why have none of the young (or, for that matter, middle-aged) guns broken through? Explanations are manifold and not mutually exclusive. The best-of-five format favors the Big Three, giving them more opportunities to summon their superiority. Their relentless winning has demoralized everyone else. Andy Murray's mother, Judy, a savvy tennis observer, has even gone so far as to suggest that because the Big Three did not grow up with iPhones, they possess greater powers of focus and healthier relationships with social media. Whatever, we're getting restless for a challenger.

Will Nick Kyrgios come to play?
For all the debate and disagreement in tennis, you can carve out consensus here: The most talented men's player under age 30 is Nick Kyrgios. The problem is that Kyrgios hasn't figured out what to do with his talent. Sometimes the 24-year-old appears destined for No. 1—not least when he defeats one of the Big Three. Other times, he plays with a complete indifference to the match's outcome. At last year's U.S. Open, fans were treated to the bizarre (and surely unprecedented) sight of a chair umpire giving Krygios a mid-match pep talk and encouraging him to try harder. This year, Kyrgios has incurred fines, including $113,000 for outbursts in Cincinnati on Aug. 14, and pulled out of the French Open because "clay sucks." He has also won two tournaments and played at a can't-avert-your-eyes level.

> "HALEP GETS VERY LITTLE ATTENTION, WHICH IS A PITY BECAUSE SHE'S THOROUGHLY PROFESSIONAL, THOROUGHLY PLEASANT AND, OH, RIGHT, HAS ALSO BEEN THE BEST WTA PLAYER OVER THE LAST THREE YEARS."

Can Simona Halep continue to shine in the shadows?
At 27, Halep is a decade younger than Serena. She's not outrageous or inconsistent or confessional on social media. She plays with a subtle mix of offense and defense and moves gracefully but will not blow many opponents off the court with power. So it is that the Romanian gets very little attention. Which is a pity because she's thoroughly professional, thoroughly pleasant and, oh, right, has also been the best WTA player over the last three years. When Halep won Wimbledon in July—dismantling Serena 6–2, 6–2 in the final, in less than an hour—she assured herself entrée into tennis's Hall of Fame. She'll now try to win her second straight major and her third since June 2018.

Can doubles continue its ascent?
When the tennis salon considers its 2019 Comeback Player of the Year, it might want to focus not on an athlete but on an entire discipline. For a long time doubles has been the sport's great undervalued asset. But lately the format is enjoying a renaissance. Plenty of stars are realizing the virtue of playing alongside a partner. For instance, Ashleigh Barty pairs well with Victoria Azarenka—a former No. 1 singles player. Tsitsipas and Kyrgios recently played together in Washington, D.C. The ultimate pairing may have come at Wimbledon when Serena Williams played mixed doubles with Andy Murray. Want to work on your volleys or second serve under match conditions? Here's a way to do it—while getting paid. And if the players benefit, so do the fans.

Can tennis get out of its own damn way?
Tennis is rather like a swan. Elegant and regal above the surface; unseemly and ungainly below. As the players execute their duties on the courts these next two weeks, the sport's administrators will be locked in conference rooms at the Tennis Center and in midtown Manhattan hotels, trying to chart the future. The ATP is looking for a CEO after its previous head was the subject of a coup, orchestrated largely by Djokovic and board member Justin Gimelstob, who was facing a charge of felony battery at the time. (He since pleaded no contest and resigned his board spot.) The International Tennis Federation is holding its presidential election with ethical questions swirling around the incumbent. The USTA also seeks a new executive director, pitting outsider candidates against insider candidates. Tennis's congenital dysfunction is as predictable as the excellence of the Big Three. And neither shows signs of abating. □

PHILIPPE LOPEZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (HALEP)

A LIFE REMEMBERED

CEDRIC BENSON

1982–2019

▸ PHOTOGRAPH BY DARREN CARROLL

ONE OF the most prolific rushers in college football history, Cedric Benson died on Aug. 17 in a motorcycle accident in Austin, where the 36-year-old had become a Longhorns legend in the early 2000s.

A four-year starter, Benson rushed for 5,540 yards, second only to Ricky Williams in Texas history (and still ninth all time in the FBS). As a senior in 2004, he averaged 152.8 yards per game; his regular-season *low* was a 92-yard game against Oklahoma. And in his collegiate finale, the consensus All-American and Doak Walker Award winner helped the Vince Young–led Longhorns to a thrilling 38–37 win over Michigan in the Rose Bowl.

Three months later Benson was drafted fourth overall by the Bears, beginning his rocky NFL career. Injuries and clashes with management plagued his three seasons in Chicago, which came to an end after he was arrested twice on alcohol-related offenses in a five-week span in 2008. He landed in Cincinnati, where he put up three 1,000-yard seasons. But after two more arrests, a one-game suspension for violating the NFL's Personal Conduct Policy and a brief five-game stint with Green Bay, Benson finally walked away from football in '12.

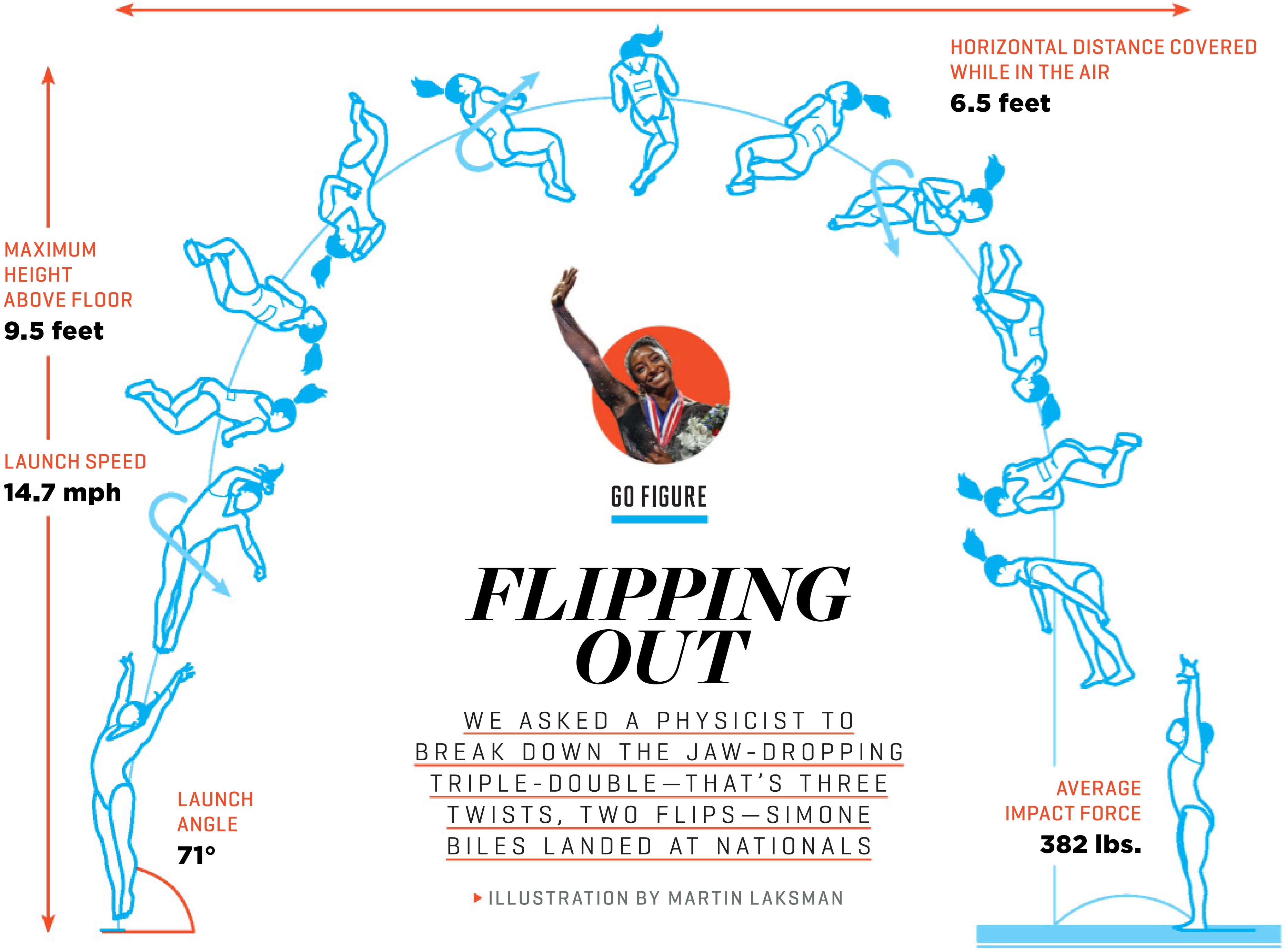
"We've coached a lot of tough players," former Texas coach Mack Brown wrote on Twitter, "but none were tougher than Cedric. He was a true spirit." □

GO FIGURE

FLIPPING OUT

WE ASKED A PHYSICIST TO BREAK DOWN THE JAW-DROPPING TRIPLE-DOUBLE—THAT'S THREE TWISTS, TWO FLIPS—SIMONE BILES LANDED AT NATIONALS

▸ ILLUSTRATION BY MARTIN LAKSMAN



THE SIMPLE answer is, No, Simone Biles does not defy the laws of physics, even if slow motion replays of her newest skill might make it look that way. She may, however, be approaching the limits of human performance.

Analyzing the video of Biles's incredible tumbling pass, David Young, a professor of physics at LSU, roughly calculated what it might take for the gymnast to go a step further. Given Biles's hang time is approximately 1.3 seconds, to fit in a theoretical third flip (and make it a triple-triple), Young estimates her launch speed would need to reach 22.6 mph; that's 8 mph faster than her estimated speed on this pass. If Biles wanted to add a twist instead, to make it a quad-double tuck, she would need to be in the air about .43 seconds longer, which would equate to a launch speed of 20.1 mph. (And even then, she'd need to slow her rotation rate to land on her feet.)

As a point of reference, Florence Griffith-Joyner's top speed when she set the world record in the 100-meter sprint was about 24 mph, and it took her 50 meters to get there. The diagonal length of the floor exercise mat is less than 56 *feet*. So unless Biles can find a way to flip or twist more quickly, or gather more speed within the confines of the mat, her triple-double just might represent tumbling's peak. □

JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (BILES); ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES (WALTON); ADAM LACY/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MASCOT)

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

▸ *THE OHIO STATE* ***UNIVERSITY FILED*** *A TRADEMARK APPLICATION FOR THE WORD "THE."*

THEY SAID IT

▸ **"I THOUGHT ALL ALONG I WAS A TREMBLING AND EXPLODING RAINBOW, MORPHING INTO A BUS STOP. I GUESS I'M GOING TO HAVE TO REINVENT MYSELF ONE MORE TIME."**

◂ ***BILL WALTON,*** *on the opportunity to broadcast a game between the White Sox and the Angels*

Eat in peace.
For once.
Kraft
For the win win
Kraft
Natural Cheese
Expertly Paired
FOR
PIZZA
TRADITIONAL CUT
FINE CUT
Mozzarella & Parmesan

© 2019 Kraft Foods

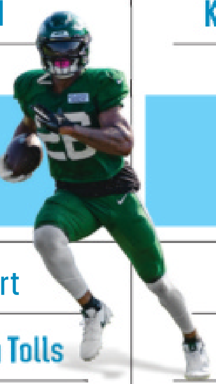
EXTRA MUSTARD

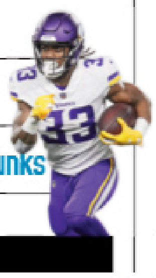
TAKING NAMES

A CLEVER MONIKER WON'T MAKE OR BREAK YOUR FANTASY FOOTBALL SEASON, BUT IT CAN SALVAGE IT. IF YOUR SQUAD FLOPS (AS IT ALWAYS DOES), LIMIT THE EMBARRASSMENT BY USING ONE OF OUR SUGGESTIONS

▸ BY DAN GARTLAND

SPONSORED CONTENT	THE CHART-TOPPING HIT	A DRAKE REFERENCE	THE SAME HACK NAME YOU USE EVERY YEAR
Any Size McCaffrey Coffee	Horses in the Dak	**In My Thielens**	Easy Brees-y
Cohen's Fashion Optical	**Here's to You, Allen Robinson**	Keke, Do You Love Me?	Honey Funchess of Oats
He Went to Jared	**Kerryon My Wayward Son**	Hotline Sterling	Penny for Your Thoughts





CLASSIC LITERATURE	IF YOU HAVE KIDS	'90S NOSTALGIA	FOR GAMERS
Waiting for Goedert	Fuller House	**The Miles Sanders Show**	Super Mariota Bros.
For Whom the Le'Veon Tolls	Baby Chark	Jack Doyle Rules!	**Fournette Battle Royale**
Dr. Odell and Mr. Hyde	**Dalvin and the Chipmunks**	Judge Ito	King Dede(de)

MOVIES

Will They Build It?

Paying homage to *Field of Dreams*, the Yankees and the White Sox will play a game in a cornfield in Iowa next August—which got us thinking: What other TV or movie venue deserves to come to life?

MYSTERY, ALASKA

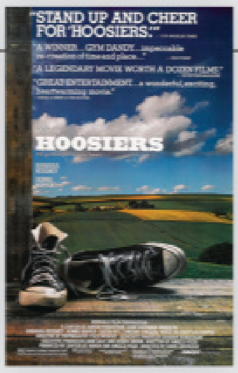
MYSTERY, ALASKA

A frozen-over lake in the mountains sounds, well, cold, but it'd *look* incredible.

rick moranis
ed oneill
Little GIANTS

LITTLE GIANTS

Let's see the Cowboys and the Giants face off at a peewee field in Ohio—or in an annexed Puerto Rico.



HOOSIERS

Jimmy Chitwood's backyard basket just beats out a game of mini hoops on the ISS (in honor of *Space Jam*).

TISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES (DIAMOND, SUNGLASSES); AMY SUSSMAN/GETTY IMAGES FOR DCP (DRAKE); ROB TRINGALI (BREES); KOHJIRO KINNO (BECKHAM JR.); JOHN JONES/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (BELL, SANDERS); LEON NEAL/GETTY IMAGES (SHARK); GREG NELSON (MARIOTA); BUENA VISTA PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION (MYSTERY, ALASKA); WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION (LITTLE GIANTS); ORION PICTURES CORP./EVERETT COLLECTION (HOOSIERS)

Wrangler®
WEAR WITH ABANDON™
WRANGLER.COM

GAMEPLAN: THE SMART FAN'S GUIDE TO RIGHT NOW

RED, WHITE AND NEW

WITH USA BASKETBALL'S TOP STARS SKIPPING THE FIBA WORLD CUP IN BEIJING, FRESH FACES WILL LEAD TEAM USA IN ITS LAST BIG TEST BEFORE THE 2020 OLYMPICS

WATCH

FIBA WORLD CUP
Aug. 31–Sept. 15, ESPN

Although it doesn't quite pack the spectacle of Olympic competition, the FIBA World Cup in Beijing should provide a welcome appetizer before NBA training camps begin in the fall. Yes, Team USA will be without several prominent names, as Anthony Davis, James Harden and others opted to rest before the NBA season. But with Kemba Walker (26) and Donovan Mitchell leading a new-look roster, there's plenty at stake for the Americans, most of whom are making their senior international debuts. There's also star power across the board, such as Greece's Giannis Antetokounmpo, the reigning NBA MVP. The Americans are favored, but the World Cup isn't just about winning a third straight gold medal—it's also a chance to impress before Tokyo 2020.

—Jeremy Woo

STREAM

THIS IS FOOTBALL
Available now on Amazon Prime

A six-part docuseries examines the unique cultural power of soccer around the world, from Rwanda to Barcelona's Camp Nou.

LISTEN

THE STERLING AFFAIRS
Out Aug. 20, ESPN.com

A new season of *30 for 30 Podcasts* delves into the 2014 scandal surrounding ousted Clippers owner Donald Sterling.

WATCH

FOOTBALL IS US: THE COLLEGE GAME
Aug. 24, ESPN

Airing after Miami plays Florida, director Jonathan Hock's 90-minute documentary celebrates the 150-year history of college football.

NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ICONS BY MARTIN LAKSMAN (3)

There's a reason businesses choose Mutual of America.

People.

Retirement plans for employers that believe people and relationships matter. Get dedicated service and one-on-one support for you and your team.

Learn how we're different. Call **1-866-954-4321**.

MUTUAL OF AMERICA
Your Retirement Company®

Mutual of America® and Mutual of America Your Retirement Company® are registered service marks of Mutual of America Life Insurance Company, a registered Broker/Dealer. 320 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10022-6839.

©2019 P&G

EVERY
HERO
SWEATS
(SOME NEVER SHOW IT)
Gillette
CLEAR GEL
COOL WAVE

CHRIS LONG

All-day protection from wetness and odor—for true champions on and off the field.

GILLETTE DEODORANT 48 HOUR PROTECTION

EDGE: GEAR. TECH. FITNESS.

PEANUT (NOT) BRITTLE

RETIRED NFL CORNERBACK CHARLES TILLMAN IS TRAINING TO ROW 65 MILES ACROSS LAKE MICHIGAN

BY KALYN KAHLER ▸ PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID E. KLUTHO

CHARLES TILLMAN'S hands are rough and scratched. There are twin calluses at the base of his middle and ring fingers, like a pair of mountains rising from his palm. He paddles his left oar, over and over and over again, fighting a strong current that's keeping him from reaching the harbor.

Tillman retired after a 13-season NFL career three years ago, and his trademark move, the Peanut Punch—a quick right jab he'd use to knock the ball away, helping him force 44 fumbles over his career—never gave him tough hands like these. On Sept. 2 (if weather allows), the former Bears cornerback will row 65 miles across Lake Michigan from St. Joseph, Mich., to Chicago's 31st Street Harbor to raise money for pediatric cancer research and to support families with critically ill children. He's teamed up with marketing exec and fellow philanthropist Jake Beckley to create Row4Kids, which combines their individual foundations to raise money.

Tillman was inspired to start his nonprofit, the Cornerstone Foundation, after his daughter Tiana had a life-saving heart transplant when she was five months old. They're hoping to persuade 650 people to donate $1 for each of the 65 miles across Lake Michigan. "Yeah, my butt goes numb after an hour and a half, and I have blisters," Tillman says of rowing. "But it's nothing to what these kids go through when they have cancer."

Beckley already rowed across Lake Michigan once by himself, and the trip was so difficult that he swore he'd never do it again. This time he and Tillman decided to build their own boat: *Hope's Journey*, 22 feet long and five feet wide.

Tillman will sit in the bow to set the pace, Beckley in the aft, to set the direction. ("I don't want to be responsible for us rowing the right way," Tillman says.) A chase boat will follow, stocked with tools they can't fit in the rowboat: extra batteries, bolts, wrenches and, most important, a hot sandwich for Tillman. "I can only do snacks for so long," he says.

Tillman currently works for the FBI, but he isn't allowed to discuss his job. All he can say is when he walks on shore after around 20 hours on the lake, he'll need a day off work to recover.

HOPE'S JOURNEY
CHICAGO, IL
CROKER

BEAR DOWN

Rowing might look easy, but Tillman quickly learned otherwise. "It's more difficult than I thought," he says. Here's how the longtime cornerback prepared.

EARLY WORKOUTS

Tillman rises at 5 a.m. to work out. He spends two hours on his Concept2 Rower, moved to his patio to practice in heat and humidity. He'll also do two 10- to 15-hour lake sessions.

TARGETED WEIGHTS

Tillman has mostly stopped weight training to focus on rowing technique. But when he lifts, he chooses exercises to target his hamstrings and lats.

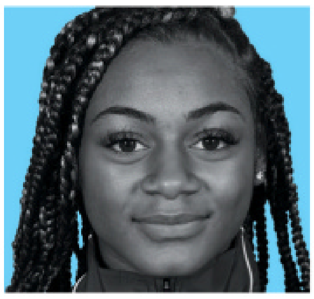
PERFECTING HIS FORM

"I didn't realize how in sync everything has to be," he says. "The sequence of putting it all together: legs, core, arms." He's learning from coaches at the Chicago Rowing Foundation.

NOMINATE NOW ▾
To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@simail.com**
For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@SI_Faces** on Twitter.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by **JEREMY FUCHS**



SHA'CARRI RICHARDSON

- ▸Track and Field
- ▸Dallas

Richardson, who recently turned pro, set the Division I and world junior under-20 100-meter record at the NCAA championships as an LSU freshman, crossing the line in 10.75 seconds. She also finished second in the 200 (22.17) and 4 × 100 relay (42.29).

JUAN NAMNUN

- ▸Baseball
- ▸Delran, N.J.

Namnun, 41, a physical education teacher and head coach at Frankford High in Philadelphia, led the Pioneers to a 6–1 win over Onley in the Public League final, becoming the first coach in league history to earn two three-peats. It was his league-record seventh title in 12 years.

CONNOR BORKERT

- ▸Powerlifting
- ▸Doylestown, Pa.

Borkert, a recent graduate of Penn, earned three gold medals in the 93-kg junior division at the World Classic championships in Sweden, taking first in squat (297½ kg), bench press (195) and total (785). He also threw the javelin for two seasons for the Quakers.

DAVID KORNACK

- ▸Track and Field
- ▸Edgar, Wis.

Kornack, a recent grad of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, won the Division III shot put title (63' 4¾") and finished third in the discus (166' 6"), helping the Blugolds win their first outdoor championship. His shot put of 65' ¾" at the indoor title last March was the farthest indoor D-III toss in 36 years.

MICHAEL DOOLIN

- ▸Baseball
- ▸Schererville, Ind.

Michael, a recently graduated righthander from Andrean High, set a Class 3A record by striking out 15 batters in a complete-game, 2–1 victory over Edgewood in the state final, helping the 59ers repeat. The Vanderbilt signee finished his senior season 14–0 with an 0.45 ERA and 131 K's in 77 innings.

UPDATE

▾▾▾▾

Gold Medal Hunter

When he appeared in FACES IN THE CROWD in the Sept. 12–19, 2016, issue, double-amputee Hunter Woodhall, who was born with a congenital defect that prevented his fibulae from forming, had just won a state title in the 400 meters against able-bodied runners as a senior at Syracuse (Utah) High. The same week he appeared in the magazine, he took silver in the 200 meters and bronze in the 400 at the Paralympics in Rio. He then became the first double-amputee to earn a track and field Division I scholarship. As an Arkansas freshman in 2018, he was part of the SEC bronze-medal-winning 4 × 400 relay team, earning All-America honors; as a sophomore he ran a personal best in the 400 (46.22), taking fourth in the conference championships. Now the 20-year-old Woodhall's eyes are on a bigger prize. "My goal is gold in 2020 [at the Paralympics]," he says.

—Torrey Hart

ARKANSAS
HUNTER WOODHALL

WHITNEY WILLISTON/LSU ATHLETICS (RICHARDSON); LENA NAMNUN (NAMNUN); NEIL BORKERT (BORKERT); UWEC PHOTO (KORNACK); THERESA DOOLIN (DOOLIN); STEVE NOWLAND/NCAA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (UPDATE)

REHYDRATE
REPLENISH
REFUEL
G
GATORADE
THIRST
QUENCHER
LEMON-LIME

GATORADE HAS CARBS AND ELECTROLYTES
SO YOU CAN BRING THE HEAT.

©2019 S-VC, Inc. GATORADE and the G BOLT Design are registered trademarks of S-VC, Inc.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

AUGUST 26 – SEPTEMBER 2, 2019

PAGE 32

“JESUS HAS BE

BY **BEN BASKIN**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
KOHJIRO KINNO

The MMQB

NFL

PREVIEW 2019

EN AT WORK”

For the NFL’s centenary, a historically hexed franchise and an agonizingly vexed fan base are eagerly anticipating a resurrection of Biblical proportions. Thanks to some bold moves and brash personalities, the league’s biggest losers of the last two decades—yes, the **CLEVELAND BROWNS**—are Super Bowl contenders

HERE IT LIES,

sepulchral and stained from a decade of degradation, neatly folded so that none of the 29 names on the back are visible. The infamous Browns quarterback jersey. The one with **COUCH** sewn on at the top and then a seemingly interminable list of recent would-be saviors—from **WYNN** to **QUINN**, **MANZIEL** to **MCCOWN**—each handwritten on duct tape, crossed out and affixed below the previous one, creating a cascading column of disappointment. Today the relic rests inside a cardboard container labeled **BOX OF SADNESS**, entombed in the storage closet of a Cleveland advertising agency, alongside a dozen such receptacles. The others hold papers waiting to be shredded.

Tim Brokaw, a local ad exec, crafted the jersey back in 2007. There were only 10 names at the beginning, but the list quickly grew, and so did the attention. Eventually Brokaw took to displaying the gag uniform on a mannequin in a window of his office, across from the Browns' stadium, where fans would congregate, uniting in their misery. Soon it began to represent something more.

For so long now it has symbolized this team, this city, once a ventricle of industrial America, now the brunt of ubiquitous mockery. In the 20 seasons since the Browns were reestablished as an expansion franchise, they have been the least successful, most dysfunctional organization in the NFL: a .298 winning percentage, nine general managers, 11 coaches. Just 18 months ago they were capping off the worst three-season stretch ever.

But something unimaginable was building in the background of that pain. Years of concerted demolition followed by a complete and rapid rebuild, a confluence of events both savvily plotted and serendipitously stumbled upon, led to this unforeseeable reality: The Browns enter 2019 with the sixth-best odds to win Super Bowl LIV. This team has not only talent in abundance but also an identity that reflects its city, with a cast-off, nose-to-the-grindstone GM; a long-toiling, nothing-came-easy coach; an undersized QB, constantly circling (or inventing) slights; and two exiled receivers, each looking to reshape his narrative.

It's no coincidence, those in northern Ohio believe, that the franchise is coming full circle as the NFL celebrates its 100th anniversary. The league was born an hour south, in Canton; the state yielded four of the first five champions; and the Browns were a preeminent early dynasty. Even after years of heartbreak, after owner Art Modell whisked the original team away to Baltimore; even after a singular futility since returning, with just one postseason appearance in two decades, the fans have largely remained.

"It seems Jesus has been at work," says Hall of Fame back Jim Brown, who retired shortly after the Browns' last title appearance, in 1966. "It is almost like: Cleveland is

JORDAN MURPHY

now back on top, like it *should* be."

But these inflated hopes, in a city that for so long has accepted the inevitability of disappointment, under a first-year coach and a second-year QB and a collection of players seen as emotionally volatile, could lead one to see this team as something other than blessed. And wouldn't it be fitting in this city, of all cities, if greater anticipation led only to greater disappointment?

BAKER'S MARK

Mayfield put his stamp on the idea of a Browns QB, throwing a rookie-record 27 TDs in 2018.

Comedian Mike Polk, who memorably dubbed the Browns' stadium a "factory of sadness," can't shake the idea that his city's fans are now something like the titular character in Stephen King's *Carrie*. "We've just been crowned prom queen," Polk says. "Everyone's cheering and we're smiling and waving, blissfully unaware of the bucket of pig's blood dangling over our head."

Welcome to Cleveland.

JOHN DORSEY, clad in his usual khaki shorts and Browns sweatshirt and beige hat with the old Brownie elf logo, flips through his iPhone, showing off photos he's taken over the past 18 months of fans and their intricately customized Browns-themed vehicles. The guy he ran into at a 7-Eleven who had an antique car painted in team colors . . . the school bus with a dog face and helmet covering the windshield. He encounters these hardcores all over the country, always has, even when he played linebacker for the Packers in the 1980s and in every airport spotted Clevelanders proudly displaying their devotions. "Five of the original [14] teams are from Ohio," he says, ticking off the names: Akron Pros, Dayton Triangles. . . . "Football *means* something in this area."

After Dorsey's playing career ended, he climbed the Green Bay org chart, from low-level scout to director of football operations. The Chiefs hired him as their GM in 2013, and in four years he built one of the league's most competitive rosters, averaging double-digit wins—until he was fired in June '17, after consecutive AFC division-round playoff losses.

Dorsey piled his wife and two children into a car the next day and drove to their cottage in Door County, Wis. For two weeks he went fishing and boating on Lake Michigan, took his kids to the zoo and to the Fourth of July parade. He played mini golf and real golf. When it rained, he went bowling. After returning to their K.C. home, he spent his days hunkered in the basement, watching game film, jotting down notes and crafting a document he'd entitle "31 Core Competencies for Building and Sustaining Success in the NFL." If ever he got another shot, he'd be ready.

Eventually the phone rang. A voice on the other end asked if he wanted to interview for a job with the Browns. Some of Dorsey's friends said he'd be crazy to go to the city where careers end, but that didn't scare him. He thought about the fan base, the history. The idea of reestablishing the early dynasty intrigued him.

On Dec. 7, 2017, the Browns made two announcements. Out was Sashi Brown, who had overseen a deliberate tanking operation, cutting or trading most of Cleveland's best players for cap space and future draft picks. In was Dorsey, joining a team with 12 losses in 12 games.

For the next four weeks the new GM stayed in the background, watching "to see how everything works—the overarching culture, the mechanisms within the building," Dorsey says. He tried to pinpoint where he needed to build the roster and came to the worst conclusion: *everywhere*. Only 19 of 53 players would return the following season.

"I had to fight for everything I ever got," says Kitchens, "and a lot of people in Cleveland do the same thing. They are looked at as never being good enough."

In March 2018, after the Browns completed just the second winless campaign in the modern era, Dorsey made the team's first major acquisition in years, acquiring disgruntled slot receiver Jarvis Landry, who, despite accumulating 400 catches over his first four seasons—the most ever to start a career—was seen in Miami as too one-dimensional and too emotional. (His constant pleading with coach Adam Gase for more involvement and his ejection from a game for fighting didn't help.) Dipping into the league's deepest cap pool, Dorsey then promptly signed the receiver to a lucrative extension. It was a move meant to speak to future free agents, signifying that that the era of Cleveland's not trying was over. Dorsey knew that Landry, one of the fiercest competitors in the NFL, was the perfect first piece, a culture shifter. "It was about bringing the pride of Cleveland back," the GM says.

Dorsey was only getting started. As a result of Sashi Brown's stockpiling assets, the Browns entered the 2018 draft with the most capital in modern NFL history: six picks in the top 105. Dorsey disconnected from social media and TV to prevent outsiders from skewing his opinions. He studied up on teams that had similar bounties—like the 1965 Bears, who owned the third and fourth picks and selected future Hall of Famers Dick Butkus and Gale Sayers—and decided that if he stayed true to his beliefs, he would land some franchise building blocks. Dorsey's core tenet, as scrawled on the whiteboard in his office: DON'T BE SCARED.

He wasn't. With the first and fourth picks he drafted Oklahoma QB Baker Mayfield and Ohio State corner Denzel Ward, two bold selections predicted by few.

KITCHENS AID

The bar for success is low: Cleveland hasn't had a winning full-time coach since the '80s.

By August those pieces appeared to be paying off. The Browns put up 35 points in their final preseason game, against the Lions, starting with three long Mayfield-led scoring drives, and Dorsey could hear the calls to anoint the next would-be savior.

The GM remembers that game, though, for something other than his prized pick. It was the first time he noticed the genial career assistant who that day had been handed play-calling duties.

FREDDIE KITCHENS always wanted to be a head coach, but he was never deemed the sort of wunderkind who gets a pass on paying his dues. The good ol' boy with the Alabama twang first oversaw running backs and tight ends at D-II Glenville (W.Va.) State; he bounced to LSU, North Texas and Mississippi State, then to the Cowboys and the Cardinals, where he spent 11 years in various roles before leaving after the 2017

DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

season. That winter he was looking at job openings, weighing possibilities, and found himself thinking back to his career as a QB at Alabama, an iconic team with a historic past. And in his mind the Browns were pro football's version of the Crimson Tide, helmet immediately recognizable. "I liked what this franchise represents," he says. "In theory it represents the NFL."

Kitchens had always wondered why the Browns struggled since returning to the league. In this business, he too thought, you can't be scared of a challenge. So when Cleveland offered him a job to work with their running backs, he accepted. And what unfolded next is already regarded on the southern shores of Lake Erie as historic: Dorsey's stopgap QB, Tyrod Taylor, getting knocked out in the first half of a Week 3 game against the Jets; Mayfield entering down 14–0; the stadium erupting; the team rallying to win 21–17. Dorsey drove home after the victory, the team's first in more than 600 days, with his windows rolled down, watching the fans dance and sing. "You could *feel* the frustration come out," he says.

The GM made his next big move five weeks later, firing both coach Hue Jackson and offensive coordinator Todd Haley, who had been feuding, then sliding Kitchens into Haley's role. Dorsey watched as his new coordinator added zone reads and options to cater to Mayfield, who then shattered the NFL rookie record for touchdown passes (27). Running back Nick Chubb, another class of '18 draftee, who hadn't had more than three carries in the first six games, would set the team's rookie rushing mark by year's end, and the Browns would claim more victories in November and December than in the previous three full seasons combined.

Entering the winter in search of a new coach, Dorsey put together a committee to find a "leader of men" and whittled an initial list of 20-plus candidates to eight. Even Kitchens, the folksy assistant who'd always believed he deserved an opportunity but was never deemed worthy, didn't think he'd get the job. After he made the first cut, he went into his interview with one objective: "I was going to present myself as me."

After two months of looking, the committee came to what Dorsey says was a unanimous decision. "I think Cleveland fits me pretty well," says Kitchens, 44, who was officially promoted on Jan. 12. "I had to fight for

POUND IT OUT

Landry (right) and the Browns went 5–3 down the stretch, treating the Dawgs to a trio of home wins.

NICK CAMMETT/DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

everything I ever got, and a lot of people in Cleveland do the same thing. They are looked at as never being good enough."

The same can be said of his young quarterback, who carries with him the anger of perceived recruiting slights in college, seemingly making headlines every other week with another display of confidence—or arrogance, depending on your perspective. It's an attitude Clevelanders say is perfectly tailored to a city that has long been dealing with an inferiority complex, and Kitchens has no problem with it. "Why would I want to change Baker?" he asks. "That's what makes him *him*. Nobody is going to change me—why would I change someone else?"

Dorsey made it a priority this offseason to surround the young passer and the first-time coach with more talent on both sides of the ball. In February he signed 2017 NFL rushing leader Kareem Hunt, whom the Chiefs cut last year after a video surfaced showing him kicking a woman. (Dorsey drafted Hunt in Kansas City and, for better or worse, says he believes in second chances.) In March the GM traded for Giants defensive end Olivier Vernon and signed free-agent D-tackle Sheldon Richardson, both former Pro Bowlers; paired with end Myles Garrett, the No. 1 pick in 2017, they form one of the most formidable lines in the league.

Dorsey wasn't done, though. Four days after the Vernon deal he called back New York GM Dave Gettleman and asked a simple question. "What about Odell?"

ODELL, YEAH!

In Beckham, Dorsey (below left) saw a guy with 44 TDs in five years. Period.

RON SCHWANE/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

JARVIS LANDRY has started to fill in Odell Beckham Jr. on the Browns' history: the early dynasty, the move to Baltimore, the cosmic connection between city and team. Everything Landry learned last season he now gets to share with his best friend.

When the receivers first met as high schoolers in Louisiana, living just 50 miles apart, they each quickly found a kindred spirit: Both are passionate, heart-on-their-sleeve types. They decided to play together at LSU and openly daydreamed about reuniting in the NFL, owning houses nearby, "doing legendary s---," Landry says.

Beckham was naturally gifted, but he credits Landry with teaching him how to work. The two would break into the Tigers' facility in the middle of the night to train, launching footballs at one another from close distance, catching them with one hand. "That all came from him," says Beckham.

The 2014 draft sent them separate ways, and both became instant stars. But they were also disgruntled, playing on noncompetitive teams in unimaginative offenses. If one was watching the other on TV, he would send encouraging texts at halftime. *Keep working. Keep your head in it. I see you open, it's going to come.*

"It's been hard," Beckham says. "We both needed each other."

For Beckham fame came in just the seventh game of his career, with a spectacular one-handed catch against the Cowboys on *Sunday Night Football*. He was instantly one of the most marketable players in the league—good-looking and charismatic, with a trademark two-toned faux-hawk, infectious smile and dance moves kids would emulate. With sweeping popularity, though, came scorching criticism. "I was talked about as if I was a celebrity who had the *luxury* of playing football," he says. "It got to the point where it wasn't really about football anymore. It was politics."

He takes partial responsibility for some of this. "I can't be like, 'I've never done anything wrong,' " he says. His emotional outbursts—whether fighting cornerback Josh Norman or a kicking net—invited that scrutiny. But Beckham believes he got more attention for those lapses than for his exceptional play on the field; he feels

FRED VUJICH

he was overly criticized by the New York media and constrained in so many ways by the Giants. “They built something that they now wanted to control,” he says, “and there is no need to try to control it.”

On the topic of his old quarterback, Beckham has nothing bad to say. He and Eli Manning were “cool” but not friends, teammates who didn’t “hang out outside” of football. He laments, however, that coaches tended to feature him only on third downs, that the offense never schemed for his abilities, that he ran slants so frequently that defenders would call out his routes presnap. The Giants are “stuck in an older mind-set,” Beckham says. Then he clarifies: He’s not trying to take “shots—just speaking facts.”

Last May, after Landry was traded to Cleveland, the two old friends met up with the new Browns QB to train at USC. With Beckham outside, Landry in the slot and Mayfield running around firing spirals, they all dreamed, somewhat jokingly, of playing together. “We didn’t think it was possible,” Landry says. “We *wanted* it to be. Like: ‘Bro, damn. What if . . .’ ”

Beckham, deep down, had long believed the Giants would trade him. He says this explains why he never bought a house in the New York area. Then last October, five weeks after signing a five-year, $95 million extension that made him the highest-paid receiver in the league, he aired his frustrations to ESPN, leading to a fine from the team. He was convinced he was gone.

When Dorsey called Gettleman on March 11, it marked the first conversation the two GMs had had about Beckham, and it was straightforward. Dorsey made an offer; Gettleman countered; Dorsey hung up. This was 4:30 p.m. Dorsey told his fellow staffers, “Damn, we may have a chance.”

Beckham was heading to a restaurant in Paris when he got the call from Gettleman. He didn’t want to answer. He knew he was getting traded; he just didn’t know where. The conversation, he says, lasted seconds.

Eli Manning? He and Beckham were “cool,” but not friends, the receiver says. And the Giants’ coaches? “Stuck in an older mind-set.”

In a situation like his, Beckham says, a star player will often get a chance to discuss his preferred trade destinations. But he was never asked. In fact, he claims to know that the Giants received better offers and still chose to send him to Cleveland, out of spite, hoping to stain his career with the enduring stigma that comes with playing for the Browns. “This wasn’t no business move,” he says. “This was personal. They thought they’d send me here to die.” (The Giants declined to comment on Beckham’s exit.)

These, though, are not those same Browns. Beckham believes he’s perfectly matched with Kitchens, an imaginative schemer, and Mayfield, who reflects Beckham’s frenetic energy on the field and has already defended the receiver against criticism.

“I’ve never had that before,” Beckham says.

NOW HE HAS his best friend again too. Landry cried when he heard the news in March. He assured Beckham that in Cleveland the past would be the past, that he’d be allowed a fresh start. “Just come be you,” he said. Then Beckham put down an offer on the house across the street from his old friend, fulfilling their childhood dream.

The two receivers know there's work to be done. Talent alone doesn't win championships—"How many playoff games have they played in?" Kitchens asks of his offensive stars; "How many Super Bowls?"—but Cleveland boasts so much of it that new challenges may be on the horizon.

Dorsey believes any potential issues having to do with a glut of offensive firepower will be offset by Mayfield's "unique way of distributing the ball." (Of his 27 touchdowns last season, no player caught more than four.)

EXPLOSIVE OFFENSE

Mayfield, Beckham and Landry have the potential to light Cleveland afire—in ways good and bad.

MAYFIELD
6
HAM JR
13
LANDRY

Beckham, for his part, thinks any such problems will sort themselves out. "*Somebody,*" he says, "is going to put that motherf----- in the end zone."

All the receiver wants now is "to play football and not deal with the extra stuff"—he even shaved off his golden curls as proof. He laments, though, that the media doesn't appear willing to let him start fresh, pointing out all the attention he already received for skipping voluntary OTAs in May.

He and Landry push back on the notion that Cleveland's combination of locker room personalities could be combustible. From their viewpoint, they've simply been misunderstood—the same way people classify anything else they don't understand, to make them feel more comfortable. Like UFOs, Beckham says.

Dorsey, meanwhile, has been listening this offseason to Public Enemy's rap anthem "Don't Believe the Hype" and relaying that message to his players. He reminds everyone that, despite all their success last year, the Browns finished third in the AFC North. "We ain't done s---," he says, suggesting a magazine headline along the lines of UNFINISHED BUSINESS. He'll push that message on his players daily—that and, of course, Don't Be Scared.

In Landry's eyes, the message is getting through. Last season he saw how the pall that had long covered the franchise still affected his teammates. It was in the locker room culture he was fighting so hard to overhaul, and on the field, where he felt refs didn't give his team any calls, as if Cleveland were fighting not just its opponents but its own history. He believes that changed, though, once Mayfield took over and Kitchens was promoted and the wins started to string together. "That stigma, that aura that was always over the Cleveland Browns," he says. "I can feel it coming off."

THREE MONTHS before their most anticipated season in decades, six Cleveland diehards sit outside a downtown bar, drinking beers and smoking cigars and comparing Browns tattoos. Some of them were there when the team won its last championship, 55 years ago. Others helped create the rabid Dawg Pound seating section, famed for its fans wearing dog masks and for fighting visiting fans. They still go by names like Big Dawg and D Dawg and Dawg Face. They believe it's their obligation to support the team, always.

"We've seen it all." "The dynasty." "The heartbreak." "We always have had hope." "That's how we are raised in Cleveland." "We don't give up . . . "

They remember the early years: the Browns' foundation in the All-America Football Conference, in 1946, and how they promptly won their first title; how they joined the NFL in '50 and won a championship right away there, too. How in the first 10 seasons they won seven titles, then added an eighth in '64, in Cleveland. Some rushed the field that day, climbed the goalposts.

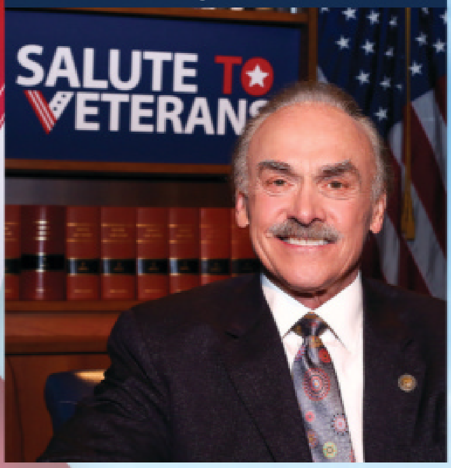
" . . . We still have eight championships." "That means something." "It's part of history." "*Our* history . . . "

Cleveland was booming back then, its economy flourishing, its population approaching one million. But by the 1960s the town's steel and iron factories were closing, and people fled en masse, the city left so polluted that in '69 the Cuyahoga River turned inferno after debris caught fire, still a source of embarrassment. Still, even when Cleveland defaulted on bank loans in '78—the first American city since the Great

FRED VUICH

SALUTE TO VETERANS

★ Rocky Bleier ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
4-time Champion
with Pittsburgh

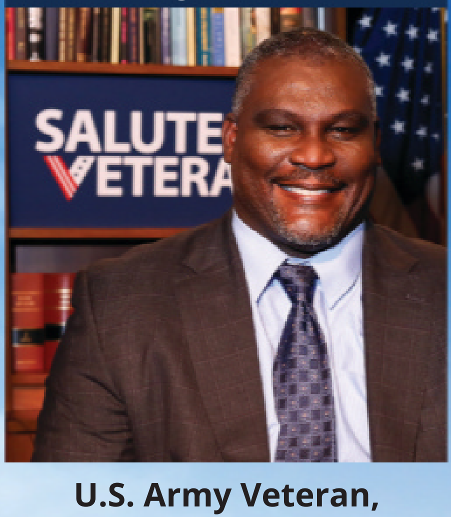
U.S. ARMY

★ Bryce Fisher ★

U.S. Air Force Veteran,
1-time Champion Runner
Up with Seattle

U.S. AIR FORCE

★ Greg Gadson ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
Honorary Captain
2-time Champion with New York

U.S. ARMY

Salute to Veterans is a national television series that honors and pays tribute to our nation's veterans, active duty service members, military families and patriotic supporters. The inspirational and educational program offers insightful discussion, resources and solutions for the ongoing issues our veterans face daily. The series shares the stories of distinguished veterans who have served their country, overcame personal challenges in their lives and made a difference in their communities, while inspiring others to do the same.

SALUTE TO VETERANS

salutetoveterans.org

The Salute to Veterans Series is made possible by the generous support of our partners.

Presented by SAP®

USAA®
verizon✓
Walgreens
Trusted since 1901™
AMTRAK®

Military.com
MILITARYKIND
G.I. JOBS®
YOUR GUIDE TO CIVILIAN SUCCESS®
Defense One
Government Executive

Depression to do so—the stadium remained packed.

That was the era of Brian Sipe and Bernie Kosar, and the fans were desperate then. The Browns imbued them with a pride they couldn't often find elsewhere, even with all the heartbreak. Red Right 88. The Drive. The Fumble. So when Modell called a noon press conference in November 1995 and announced he was moving his team, the city responded with fury: lawsuits, protests, thousands of orange postcards mailed to league headquarters, countless more faxes and phone calls demanding injustice be righted. Modell fled on a private jet and never returned.

" . . . I took three days off work just to fax letters." "I didn't watch football for four years." "A piece of us was taken." "It's *our* team."

Now these six men sip their beers and reflect on the past, on the decades when they had to bribe their grandchildren to attend games. But they also envision

THE BLUES AFTER THE BROWNS

FORMER CLEVELAND COACH HUE JACKSON IS GRAPPLING WITH LIFE IN THE SHADOW OF THREE TELLING NUMBERS: 3-36-1

by **GREG BISHOP**

ON THE WORST day of the worst year of his life, after the Browns fired him as their coach last Oct. 29, Hue Jackson told Cleveland's owner and GM to "get the f--- out" of his office. He grabbed a few things and drove home as fast as he could, windows up, no radio. Then he went down to his basement guest room, turned off the lights and didn't come upstairs for three days. "I could have laid there for months," he says.

Nine months later it all still hurts, in part because Jackson defines himself as a football coach, and his bosses decided to pay him to sit at home rather than to lead their team. It also hurts, though, because he is human. Everyone knows why Jackson was fired. The 3-36-1 record in 2½ seasons with the Browns is there for all to see. "I failed tremendously," he says. "Regardless of how you look at it."

But few see the private pain. Jackson never felt depressed before last fall, never descended so deeply into unending gloom.

Jackson, 53, ponders this all as he reclines on his backyard patio in Cleveland, beside his pool, with a river sparkling in the distance. A sliver of tequila fills the bottom of his glass. Chino, a golden doodle, settles at his feet. Not all is well, though.

Twenty-five minutes to the southeast the Browns are beginning training camp, their Super Bowl prospects brightened by rainbows of optimism. Jackson, meanwhile, will be moving to a new home in Cincinnati in a few weeks. Everything feels unnatural, out of sync. For each of the previous 32 summers he reported to a football field, identified as a football coach. Until now.

This summer Jackson is a Dance Dad who drops off the youngest of his three daughters, nine-year-old Haydyn, at practices; he's a voracious reader and a budding businessman and a workout fanatic who hits the gym twice a day. In the months since he finally started to climb out of his funk—his wife, Michelle, says the dark period "is still going on"—he's killed his newfound free time by following the Lakers, familiarizing himself with his finances, changing a few lightbulbs and getting closer to the family he ghosted for so many seasons. In most ways life has never seemed more normal. And he hates that.

This is the reality of a coach watching for the first time in an eternity as a season starts without him. But Jackson's record as a head coach complicates any sympathy he might garner. He is not just a gridiron lifer but also a two-time former NFL coach who never posted a winning season, who went 0–16 in '17 and who holds an 11-44-1 career mark, the second-worst in history.

Jackson declines to trash his old team; he won't get into the Cleveland tanking operation that he took over, when management would regularly cut good players to shed salary and traded down in drafts to stockpile future picks. He knows that such sentiments would only sound like excuses, that his many detractors would point out that the Browns went 5–3 after he left.

He's not asking for sympathy, though maybe he deserves some, considering that he's a their future. They feel, with their shared histories, more connected with this team than any before. The GM and the coach and the quarterback—*they understand us*. Those castoff receivers—*they, too, want to rethink labels, like the ones ascribed to this city for so long*.

They are optimistic, of course. And cautious, of course, after all they've been through. They talk about a home playoff game, a winning season—or just winning the first game of the season, which the Browns haven't done since 2004. They're actively trying to manage expectations, but they also want to enjoy the ride, this feeling that they haven't had in so long, anticipation mixed with apprehension. Still. They can't help but wonder what it would mean for the Browns—*their* Browns, the old soul-of-the-city Browns—to return.

". . . It'll go back to like how we know it." "How it should be." □

---

man with an inspiring life story, a minority coach who grinded his way to the top, who has been bombarded by personal tragedy. To say nothing of his own football-affected health.

Jackson suffered a heart attack after a morning jog in 2014, when he was the Bengals' offensive coordinator, and while he doesn't believe coaching almost killed him, Michelle is less sure. She had seen how little he slept, how he would leave home at 4 a.m. and return at midnight. Then he started to have episodes, similar in some ways to panic attacks—what both Jacksons describe as nonepileptic seizures. Anxiety would overwhelm him and he would black out.

That all predated the real loss. One week before Browns camp last summer Jackson learned that his older brother, John Jr., had died in prison, where he was serving a life sentence. (Hue still doesn't know exactly what happened; officials told him only that John "bled out.") Two weeks later his mom, Betty Lee, died from dementia. By the end she would confuse her son with her brother, and it crushed Hue that she couldn't revel in so many of his accomplishments.

She didn't know that in 2016 the Pro Football Writers Association had named Jackson—who had come up from nothing in South Central L.A., systematically climbing the college and pro ranks—the Co-Assistant Coach of the Year. Or that he had been offered an interview that offseason, he says, for the Giants' head opening. Or that he had passed up that job—and walked away from a handshake deal with Bengals management to succeed his mentor, Lewis—for the Browns job, even though, as Lewis says, "few minority coaches have gone into great situations." She never got to hear about the first time he addressed his new players about Cleveland's losing culture, telling them, "Change is here. Change is now."

DYLAN BUELL/GETTY IMAGES

MORE ON SI TV

To watch Greg Bishop's full-length Big Interview with former Browns coach Hue Jackon, visit SI.TV

Instead, more losses, and with them more stress, more blackouts.

Jackson understands the baseline; he knows that even as an otherwise successful football mind—his teams were a combined 130-109-1 before he arrived in Cleveland, certainly good enough for sustained NFL employment—he will now and possibly forever be known for his disastrous tenure with the Browns.

He vacillates. That is him . . . that is *not* him. "I'm not a loser," Jackson says. "So that bothers me. I'm not built that way. I hate losing, and it hurt every day. It ground me down every freakin' week."

He pauses, his face twisted into a grimace. He wants to coach again. He must coach again. Because 3-36-1 still hurts. "Let's be honest," he says. "Right now, that's what's on my tombstone." □

REMEMBER THE HURT

BY **KALYN KAHLER**

ILLUSTRATION BY **MICHAEL BYERS**

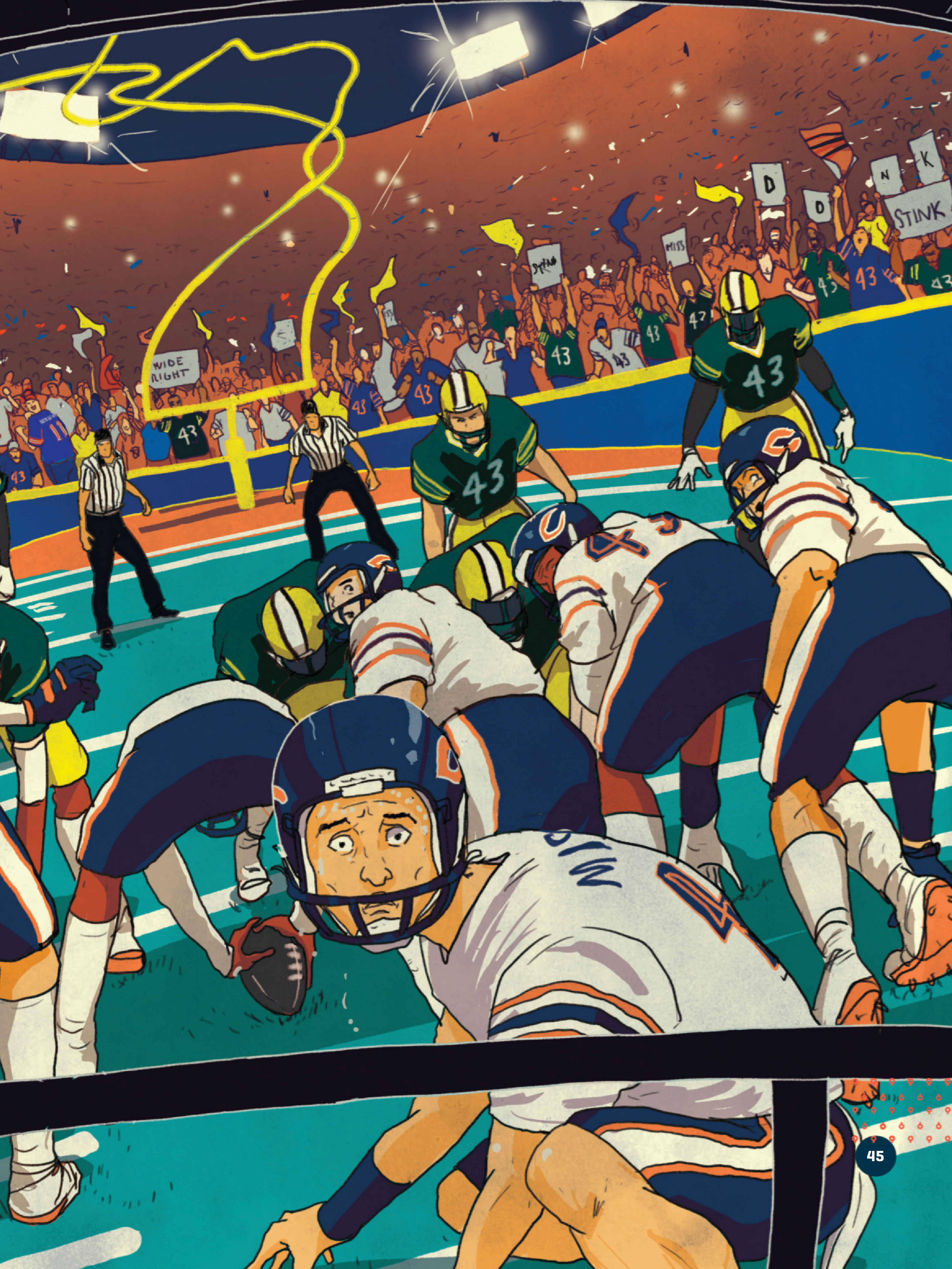
The MMQB

THE WAITRESS high-steps through a gantlet of carry-on bags, maneuvering her way to the four young men dressed in sweats bearing their college logos. Two kickers, a holder and a long snapper are piled into vinyl seats. Here, in the crumb-lined booth of an airport Chili's, is where their journey ends.

It's the first Sunday in May, and the four are waiting for their afternoon flights out of O'Hare. They're among the many specialists who have left Halas Hall empty-handed, save for a Bears nameplate peeking out of an unzipped backpack atop a pile of duffel bags just outside the restaurant's entrance. Between sips of beer, Spencer Evans, one of the kickers, mentions that the competition seemed strange from the start. Long snapper Luke Idoni wonders—and, sometimes, still does—if those three days in Lake Forest were all a weird dream.

D
O
I
N
K
MISS
43
43
43
43
43
43
43

Obsession! Overanalysis! Conspiracy! Welcome to the wildest kicker competition ever held. Seven months after the "double-doink" sunk their Super Bowl hopes, the **BEARS ARE OBSESSED** with finding the right foot as pressure builds toward their next big kick


WIDE RIGHT
MISS
D
O
N
K
STINK
43

The state of confusion grew out of the early stages of a kicker search the likes of which none of the participants could have anticipated, marked by unyielding pressure, conspiracy theories, cryptic analytics, a bizarre air of secrecy and a coaching staff's obsession with the final, heartbreaking moment of last season.

Over beers and greasy appetizers the quartet reviews the week's events in hopes of answering one overarching question: What the hell was *that*?

MOMENTS AFTER the final selection of the 2019 NFL draft was announced in April, Emmit Carpenter's phone rang. It was Chris Tabor, Chicago's special teams coordinator, inviting the former University of Minnesota kicker to rookie minicamp for a tryout. Carpenter gladly accepted. A few hours later he texted a couple of fellow kicking prospects he'd gotten to know during the predraft process. *Where are you going?* He asked Purdue's Evans and Notre Dame's Justin Yoon. The responses from both: *Chicago, how about you?*

Before the draft began, the Bears already had three kickers on the roster: Redford Jones, Chris Blewitt and Elliott Fry. Sources around the league typically say four, maybe five kickers is the maximum teams bring in for an open competition. After the text exchange, Carpenter believed he'd be one of six. He was wrong.

When Alex Kjellsten, a kicker-punter out of McNeese State, arrived at Halas Hall, he didn't notice anything strange until he walked into the cafeteria: kickers, everywhere. He recognized a few from YouTube highlight videos. There was the Minnesota State kicker with the long blond hair (Casey Bednarski) and the San Diego State guy (John Baron II).

Last January the Bears' season came to a screeching halt in a 16–15 wild-card playoff loss to the Eagles, when Cody Parkey's potential game-winner from 43 yards was tipped at the line before hitting the left upright, then the crossbar. NBC's Cris Collinsworth coined it the "double-doink," and the heart-wrenching sound still echoes through greater Chicago.

The Bears released Parkey in March, and the search for a replacement has been on ever since. But the size of the group they initially brought in suggested less a kicker competition and more the formation of a K-pop band: *nine* kickers, and zero NFL regular-season attempts among them.

DOINK, DOINK

His season-ending kick was the sixth time Parkey hit an upright last season.

"Nine guys is ridiculous!" says Mike Westhoff, a longtime special teams coordinator for the Jets and the Saints. "It's not that I wouldn't look at nine guys, but I wouldn't look at nine guys in a pile. That makes it a sham."

Adam Vinatieri, the Colts' likely Hall of Famer, is entering his 24th NFL season. He says the most competitors he ever faced in training camp was three, before his rookie season in New England. He reflects for a moment, then chuckles. "Nine guys? I don't know. . . ."

NORMALLY, KICKERS spend camp toiling in seclusion and relative anonymity. It was immediately clear this wouldn't be the case in Lake Forest. During his first meeting with the 80-something rookies, coach Matt Nagy introduced himself and his staff, then cued up highlights from Chicago's 2018 season playing over a rap beat . . . until the 43-yard miss and the aftermath. The team mascot, Staley, falls to the ground. Parkey hangs his head. Nagy's mouth is agape, his eyes darting back and forth as if searching for an alternative ending.

The next day the kickers began work on their own field. After a couple of hours the battalion of specialists was marched down a dirt path to join the rest of the team. The kickers were told to stay warm, so they

JEFF HAYNES

stretched. Because there were no kicking nets on the sideline they couldn't practice with an actual ball.

A half hour later Nagy called up Fry for a 43-yard attempt with the full field goal unit in place. The symbolism didn't require an explanation. To layer additional pressure, the loud music that played throughout the day stopped and no one spoke. The effect was an eerie stillness Nagy dubbed "Augusta silence," an idea he'd picked up watching the Masters.

Fry missed. He walked back to the sideline, and Nagy carried on with practice. A few minutes later he asked all the kickers to line up at the 50-yard line: four on the right hash, four on the left. (Kjellsten, the kicker-punter, punted and held for field goals but did not take any kicks the first day.) They each attempted a series of field goals, again, from 43.

"It's the whole team, coaching staff, front office, all the media watching," says Carpenter.

They went in numerical order. Blewitt missed. Bednarski missed. Jones missed. Carpenter missed. Ultimately, the group went a combined 2 for 8.

It wasn't long before the search took on a sort of Rube Goldberg feel—an unnecessarily complicated approach to a routine position battle. It went beyond Augusta silence kicks and the constant reminders of Parkey.

Jamie Kohl, an independent kicking coach, was hired as a consultant. He and Tabor charted field goals and recorded data like apex, ball speed, distance traveled and launch angle using TrackMan, a radar system widely used by pro golfers to analyze their swings. (Chicago is the first NFL team to use it to evaluate kickers.)

On the morning of the second day of rookie camp, the kickers gathered around the whiteboard outside the locker room, studying a sheet of paper taped next to the special teams depth chart. It was a table of scores and a ranking of how each had performed on day one.

They did some mental math to decode the scoring system. The prevailing hypothesis: One point was awarded for a made field goal, with those from long distances worth more. Some kickers thought a point was added for good ball rotation, but they weren't entirely sure. The list was a source of confusion rather than clarity.

The leader from day one was Fry, the rare success story from the Alliance of American Football: He'd been 14 for 14 on field goals with the Orlando Apollos before the league abruptly ceased operations last season. Each kicker had a comment, in capital letters, next to his field goal score. In second place: CASEY BEDNARSKI, 15 [POINTS], BALL TRAJECTORY IS A MAJOR CONCERN.

The comments were highly specific, often referencing data points recorded by the TrackMan radar panel set up on a tripod behind the goal posts. In third: JOHN BARON, 13 [POINTS], IMPROVE FG AND MPH OFF THE FOOT.

"Why does [mph] even matter?" asks one kicker, who requested anonymity. "If it's going in, it's going in."

Outside of using the data to establish coaching points with each kicker, Chicago did not share the TrackMan measurements with any of the competitors. Increasing the miles per hour or the rotational speed of a kick is an obscure request already; without data to gauge progress, it proved even more difficult.

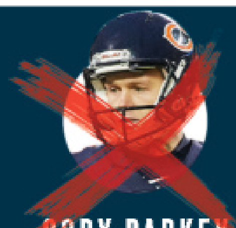
The public scoring reminded many of the participants of Kohl's Kicking Camps. Kohl kicked at Iowa State from 1996 to '98 and appeared in three preseason games with the Seahawks before he turned to molding kickers. His national rankings, which include only those who have attended one of his clinics or camps, have become a must for any kid seeking a college scholarship. Because most NCAA coaches don't know how to evaluate kickers, they lean on Kohl's rankings for recruiting. Kohl will remain on Chicago's staff throughout the season.

Several kickers at rookie camp either had never worked with him or had only done so sparingly. They expressed concern that Kohl's evaluation process was biased because of his prior relationships.

"All of Jamie's guys, they could have shanked the kick, and it was like, *Oh, you have really good rotation, your foot is wrapping around the ball*," says one kicker who was cut after rookie camp. "I don't think this situation will be solved or will be what the team needs to be until Jamie Kohl is gone." (Kohl originally agreed to an interview for this story, but hours later said, after discussing the request with the Bears, he would defer to Nagy and Tabor for all comments regarding the kicker search. During a general press availability at veteran minicamp, Nagy admitted, in regards to kicking, "I just know you either make it, or you miss it. That's what I work off of." The Bears declined multiple interview requests for Nagy and Tabor. They responded only partially to an emailed list of questions and did not address criticisms of Kohl and the process of the competition.)

OPEN CASTING

THE 11 KICKERS IN BEARS CAMP SINCE LAST SEASON



CODY PARKEY

Cut on March 13

REDFORD JONES

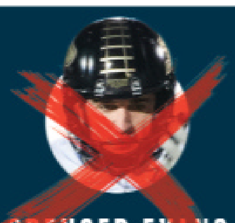
Cut after rookie minicamp

JOHN BARON II

Cut after rookie minicamp

EMMIT CARPENTER

No contract after rookie minicamp



SPENCER EVANS

No contract after rookie minicamp

NAGY HAS a stable of pithy mottoes he trots out to his team: *Be you. We're chasing great. It's a we thing, not a me thing.* He spent the spring and early summer trotting out a new one: *Remember the hurt.*

But at what point does owning up to a mistake from the past morph into a counterproductive obsession? Kickers are complicated creatures. Teams want to test them in pressure situations in practice to know how they will respond in games, but it's a thin line between that and setting them up for failure.

"You're creating a negative situation; just move on," says former kicker Jay Feely, who was once spoofed by *SNL* after missing three field goals in a 2005 game for the Giants. He went on to be a reliable kicker for another eight seasons after that. "You wouldn't sign a quarterback and have him throw [the same pass at the same yardage repeatedly in practice] because the last guy threw an interception."

Adds Yoon, "It's not efficient for the team to continuously beat that one dead horse the whole time. You have to build a system of confidence for your kicker."

One kicker who requested anonymity summed it up this way: "All the vibes they gave us just did not seem positive whatsoever. It didn't seem like anyone did well."

There is also a scapegoating aspect at work. Specifically, before its ill-fated path to the left upright, Parkey's kick was tipped by defensive tackle Treyvon Hester, part of an Eagles surge that overwhelmed the Bears. More broadly, it was another rough game for Chicago's offense in a season of up-and-down performances. Second-year quarterback Mitchell Trubisky's near-disastrous first-half performance was overshadowed by a heroic throw to set up Parkey's attempt. But the game never should have come down to a last-second, do-or-die kick.

After practice wrapped on Sunday, none of the tryout kickers were asked to meet with the front office staff to sign a contract before they left. Baron and Jones were cut. The group was told that three would survive, but just two made it out of elimination: Fry and Blewitt.

Tabor made a call to the Saints to recommend Kjellsten, a Louisiana native, for their rookie minicamp. When Kjellsten arrived in New Orleans the following weekend, he was pleasantly surprised to see he was one of only four kickers. It was back to anonymity. "That Chicago experience really helped me," he says. "No nerves at all."

TWO YOUNG boys, maybe around nine years old, sit on the grass just behind the right corner of the end zone, underneath a taut yellow rope that separates the 8,000 or so training camp fans from the practice field. They clap as fan favorites Khalil Mack and Tarik Cohen take their spots for drills. But the two players that interest them the most aren't in sight.

"Hey, do you want to go watch the kickers?" one says. With that, they scurry off to one of the back fields.

While many assume Parkey's appearance on the *Today* show one week later sealed his fate, Chicago's front office knew after the double-doink that they would have to cut him. But several sources active in the kicking

JEFF HAYNES (PARKEY, PINEIRO IN ACTION); GEORGE WALKER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (JONES, BARON); KEITH GILLETT/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (CARPENTER); ROBIN ALAM/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (EVANS); RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES (YOON); MCNEESE STATE UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS (KJELLSTEN); MINNESOTA STATE MANKATO ATHLETICS (BEDNARSKI); JUSTIN K. ALLER/GETTY IMAGES (BLEWITT); NUCCIO DINUZZO/GETTY IMAGES (FRY, PINEIRO)

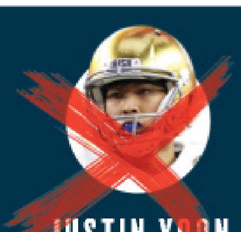
community say Parkey is better than anyone the Bears brought in this offseason. He is currently home, in Jupiter, Fla., playing golf and staying in shape. Parkey did not respond to calls or texts, and through his agent declined an interview request.

The day after rookie minicamp, Chicago sent a conditional 2021 seventh-round draft pick to the Raiders for Eddy Pineiro, who played in one preseason game as a rookie last season before spending 2018 on injured reserve. Blewitt didn't make it out of veteran minicamp. He was cut the day after all three kickers missed a 42-yard try under Augusta silence.

Nagy continued to show the double-doink during team meetings in OTAs and veteran mini camp. At training camp, Augusta silence was gone due to the fans in attendance, but there was a new experiment. Fry and Pineiro started camp by alternating days. If the kicker performed well during practice, he earned “dealer's choice”—the right to name the distance for his final attempt of the day. On Fry's day he drilled a 60-yarder. On Pineiro's, he lined up from 63—and made it. With that, the crowd broke into chants of “Ed-*DEE*! Ed-*DEE*!”

» **WITH THREE** seconds left in the first half of the preseason opener, the Bears found themselves at Carolina's 25-yard line. Fry trotted out, setting up facing the north end zone goalposts, 43 yards away.

Right on cue, Panthers coach Ron Rivera called a timeout. (He revealed later that he iced Fry as a favor to the Bears.) Fry nailed it. He said he tried to treat it like any other kick, but “obviously that number has been ingrained into my memory.”

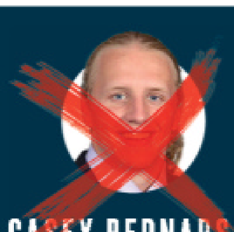


JUSTIN YOON

No contract after rookie minicamp

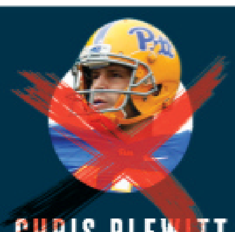
ALEX KJELLSTEN

No contract after rookie minicamp



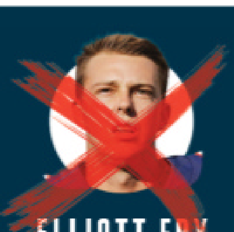
CASEY BEDNARSKI

No contract after rookie minicamp



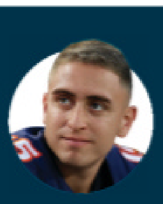
CHRIS BLEWITT

Cut during veteran minicamp



ELLIOTT FRY

Cut after preseason Week 2



EDDY PINEIRO

Acquired from Oakland on May 6

STILL KICKING

Pineiro is the last man standing, despite opening the preseason with a miss.

The good times didn't last for Fry. After pulling a 47-yard attempt in the second preseason game, he was waived. The Bears like how Pineiro's powerful leg projects in an NFC North winter—December includes two games at Soldier Field and one in Green Bay. Snow would be new for the Miami native and University of Florida product, but he is the last man standing. For now. After the preseason opener, Chicago reportedly tried to acquire Baltimore kicker-punter Kaare Vedvik. (He was dealt to the Vikings instead.)

There's likely to be a pressure kick during the Bears' 2019 season, whether it's Pineiro or a kicker to be determined attempting it. As for the process that brings them to that kicker—the process those four specialists were trying to make sense of in an airport Chili's—think of it this way: Two kickers, a holder and a long snapper walked into a bar. If Chicago lines up for a pressure kick in January, we'll find out whether that's the setup for another bad joke. □

The Forgettable Years of a STAFF TO

KYLE SHANAHAN
Then: Offensive coordinator
Now: Head coach, San Francisco 49ers

MATT LAFLEUR
Then: Quarterbacks coach
Now: Head coach, Green Bay Packers

BY *GREG BISHOP*

PHOTOGRAPH BY
WASHINGTON REDSKINS

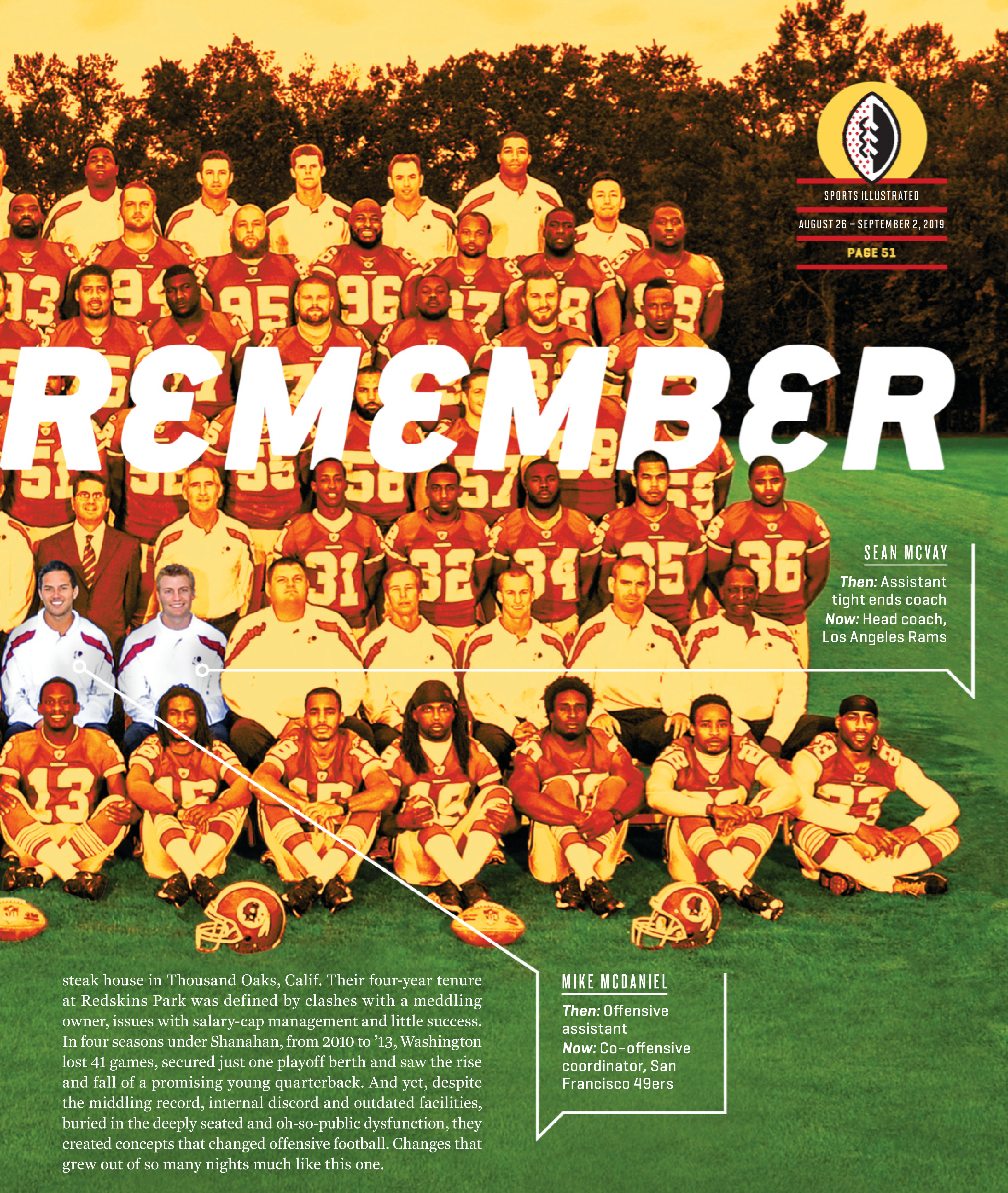
The MMQB

The **MIKE SHANAHAN** era in Washington lasted
With young innovators including **KYLE SHANAH**

MIKE SHANAHAN sits at the head of a banquet table. His disciples, roughly two dozen members of the Church of Outside Zone, fill the seats on either side. They're turning a social event into a coaching clinic—same as always—and it's getting a little . . . weird. Salt shakers become wideouts. Empty wine bottles stand in for running backs. Slabs of meat, partially dissected, land in the middle of new plays.

Six years ago little was expected out of the men now filling the private back room of this upscale

REMEMBER



SEAN MCVAY
Then: Assistant tight ends coach
Now: Head coach, Los Angeles Rams

MIKE MCDANIEL
Then: Offensive assistant
Now: Co-offensive coordinator, San Francisco 49ers

steak house in Thousand Oaks, Calif. Their four-year tenure at Redskins Park was defined by clashes with a meddling owner, issues with salary-cap management and little success. In four seasons under Shanahan, from 2010 to '13, Washington lost 41 games, secured just one playoff berth and saw the rise and fall of a promising young quarterback. And yet, despite the middling record, internal discord and outdated facilities, buried in the deeply seated and oh-so-public dysfunction, they created concepts that changed offensive football. Changes that grew out of so many nights much like this one.

four seasons and yielded three 10-loss campaigns, zero playoff victories—and a coaching staff now taking the NFL by storm.

AN, SEAN MCVAY and **MATT LAFLEUR,** the Redskins never knew what they had

MOVING ON

RG3 (right) thrived—briefly—under a staff featuring McVay (right, in white jacket) and McDaniel (right, far left). Above, from top: McVay, McDaniel, Kyle Shanahan, Matt LaFleur.

JAMIE SCHWABEROW (MCVAY); MICHAEL ZAGARIS/SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS/GETTY IMAGES (MCDANIEL, SHANAHAN); QUINN HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES (LAFLEUR)

They're all here, at the dinner, for something called the QB Collective. It's an organization dedicated to quarterback development, a program built around the principles to which they all subscribe. To Shanahan's left are Matt LaFleur, the new Packers head coach, and first-year Broncos offensive coordinator Rich Scangarello; to his right, the 49ers' co–offensive coordinators: Mike McDaniel (run game) and LaFleur's younger brother Mike (pass). Absent this evening are two other prominent members from that Redskins staff: Shanahan's son, Kyle, the boss in San Francisco, and Sean McVay, the Rams' wunderkind coach.

These men, once (derisively) labeled "the Fun Bunch," either worked for Mike Shanahan in Redskins Park or apprenticed under someone who did. They can recite the quarterbacks who compiled their best seasons playing in some version of Shanahan's timeless system. A partial list includes everyone from a Hall of Famer (John Elway) to a league MVP (Matt Ryan) to promising prospects (Jimmy Garoppolo, Jared Goff) to several journeymen who briefly shined (Brian Griese, Matt Schaub and Brian Hoyer). "It's the best, most efficient offensive system in pro football," Scangarello says. "It makes quarterbacks, not the other way around."

The disciples consider Shanahan a misunderstood offensive genius, and they view that time in Washington not as the disaster the win-loss record suggests but as the start of something revolutionary. In a league where many franchises have been slow to innovate, and most coaches remain preoccupied with not getting fired, this group seems preternaturally inclined to take the opposite approach—which might be why they have amassed so many pink slips through the years. Although no one knew then, and few know even now, the concepts created and enhanced inside those coaching rooms—and restaurants and dive bars—have now spread across the NFL and were used in two of the past three Super Bowls (by Kyle Shanahan's Falcons and McVay's Rams).

All the jokes this past spring about anyone in McVay's orbit landing a head coaching interview missed the point. McVay is just one branch on a tree that took root not in Los Angeles but in Ashburn, Va., for an organization that couldn't see the genius.

Shanahan, 66, is unofficially retired; he hasn't coached football since Washington. He says it's not for him to gauge how much credit that group deserves. Perhaps this is more telling: He says he will not write a book about his career and his philosophies. "Like with Silicon Valley," he says. "You think they're telling people what they're doing?" The QB Collective has a competitive advantage it wants to keep.

THE NEXT day, Mike Shanahan leans back on a metal bench at Westlake High School. It's a warm summer morning in Southern California, as dozens of college quarterback prospects run through drills overseen by his adherents. Richmond Flowers III, a member of that Redskins staff who is now an agent for coaches (he does not represent Shanahan), started the QB Collective as a way of sharing Shanahan's philosophies with all levels of football. None of the men with whistles hanging around their necks believe they're the only visionaries in pro football; this isn't Al Gore taking credit for the Internet. But Shanahan *is* different, always has been, and that's how he ended up in Redskins Park.

Explaining his philosophies, Shanahan starts with his influences. He studied and borrowed from high school or college coaches, who tend to innovate more than their pro counterparts; he took some tenets from Bill Walsh and others from Mike Holmgren, George

JOHN MCDONNELL/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES (GRIFFIN)

Seifert and Alex Gibbs, the long-time offensive line coach considered football's premier zone-blocking guru; and when he became the head coach in Denver in 1995, he applied everything he learned from nine previous stops.

Shanahan's philosophy starts on the ground, specifically those outside-zone runs. By sending most plays wide of the tackles, he sought to effectively cut the field in half—he could attack five to seven players more easily than all 11. He also wanted all his plays to look the same at the start, whether it was an outside-zone run, a drop-back pass or a play-action bootleg.

Because Shanahan ran the outside zone, he needed faster—and typically smaller—linemen. Most teams weren't looking for those types of players, so he constructed dominating run games at discount prices. The Broncos won back-to-back Super Bowls in 1998 and '99 with an offensive line featuring starters drafted in round 7 (center Tom Nalen), round 10 (guards Mark Schlereth and Brian Habib) and not at all (tackle Tony Jones). After losing three previous Super Bowls, Elway accepted the run-heavy approach, and running back Terrell Davis, a sixth-round pick, secured his bust in Canton during that dominant stretch.

What did all of this tell Shanahan? That his system worked. That great quarterbacks mattered, of course, but that efficiency at that position mattered more. He taught them like Walsh taught him, to read with their feet, to move in rhythm, spin through progressions, limit risk. If Elway could buy that philosophy, anybody could.

Shanahan also grounded his approach in an inventive spirit. As offensive coordinator in San Francisco, he once suggested to his head coach, Seifert, that the 49ers line Jerry Rice up in the backfield. Seifert blanched, at least until he saw linebackers trying to shadow the greatest receiver of all time. Where offensive football in those days generally featured coaches listing what they could not do, Shanahan helped usher in a new era. "The Can Generation" is what retired quarterback Trent Dilfer calls it.

» **MIKE MCDANIEL** grew up in Greeley, Colo., obsessing, like most kids in the Centennial State, over the Broncos. He became a Denver ball boy, then a wideout at Yale. After graduation in 2005, when it came time to ask Shanahan for a letter of recommendation, the coach suggested he intern for the team, for free, instead. McDaniel was exactly the kind of intellectually curious young coach Shanahan wanted. He graduated from mindless tasks like helping repair scout-team jerseys to working for Kyle Shanahan as an offensive assistant in Houston (2006–08).

> ***"It was a Steve Jobs aesthetic," says McDaniel. "We weren't outside the box; we didn't have one."***

A late-season collapse in 2008—and third straight nonplayoff year—cost Mike Shanahan his job in Denver. He was out of the league for a year before the Redskins tabbed him to replace Jim Zorn, who had been unable to develop Jason Campbell into a franchise QB. Shanahan would be Washington's new quarterback whisperer.

McDaniel joined him at Redskins Park in 2011. Once there, he found an environment unlike anything he ever could have expected, where ideas were not so much encouraged as expected, and to not evolve was tantamount to a fireable offense. "It was Steve Jobs—that aesthetic," McDaniel says. "We weren't outside the box; we didn't have one."

Mike Shanahan filled his staff with young, motivated coaches; most were early 30s or younger, many in their first or second jobs. "A bunch of overambitious, average athletes," McDaniel says. "We're all Napoleon Complex dudes. And we're competing against people that are the exact opposite dichotomy—they're [thinking], *What did Bill [Belichick] say to do?"*

Shanahan saw the future in the unlined faces that stared back at him. That started with Kyle, the prodigal son. For years he had implored his father to join forces, but Dad had laid out three nonnegotiable conditions: 1) Kyle had to become the offensive coordinator for another team, 2) he had to call the plays for that team, and 3) that offense had to finish the season in the top five in total offense. Otherwise, he told his son, "they'd call that nepotism." Kyle checked all three boxes in only his second year as a play-caller (with Houston, the league's fourth-ranked offense in 2009). He was 30 when his father hired him as Washington's offensive coordinator.

Matt LaFleur, 30 when he arrived in Washington, came with Kyle from Houston to become the Redskins' quarterbacks coach. Early in his tenure, he heard someone yelling through the wall next door as he scribbled on a whiteboard. "Who's that?" he wondered.

As it turned out, Mike Shanahan was conducting an interview for an offensive assistant opening. He knew the applicant's grandfather, John McVay, a former Niners GM who with Walsh had constructed one of the NFL's great dynasties. Shanahan says that after meeting with 24-year-old Sean, he canceled the other three interviews.

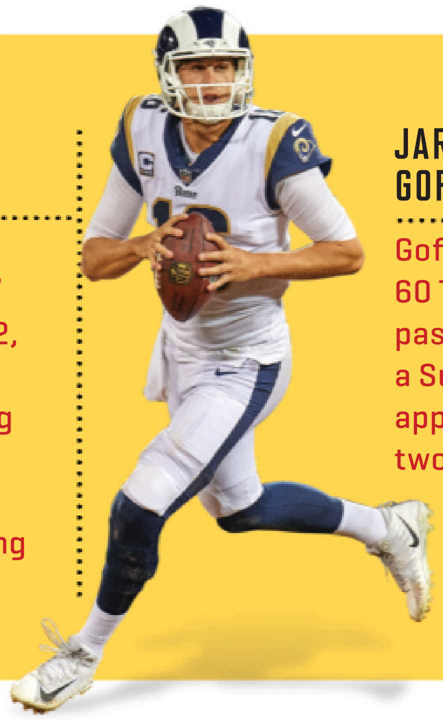
Shanahan tasked McVay with binding playbooks, making copies, scribbling out play sheets and organizing cutups of opposing defenses. But McVay could study another coach's play sheet for 20 minutes and recite more than 100 plays. He remembered random sequences from games played by other teams, just from casually watching them on TV. "It's almost like remembering a song for him," McDaniel says.

TAKING UP ARMS

THE SHANAHAN SYSTEM HAS CHURNED OUT SOME OF THE LEAGUE'S TOP QUARTERBACKS

KIRK COUSINS

The Shanahans' pick in 2012, Cousins is sixth among active QBs in career passer rating (95.0).



JARED GOFF

Goff has 60 TD passes and a Super Bowl appearance in two seasons under Sean McVay.

The young staff's ideas—many honed with salt and pepper shakers during happy hour at watering holes like the Ashburn Pub—were making their way into the playbook. "Here was a multibillion-dollar organization," says Flowers, "being run by Mike Shanahan and a bunch of 25-year-olds."

THE REDSKINS went 6–10 in 2010 and 5–11 the next year, due to a combination of subpar talent and injuries. Finding a quarterback remained an issue. They had gone with an aging Donovan McNabb and a rehashed Rex Grossman. They also tried out John Beck, a 2007 second-round pick of the Dolphins.

As the 2012 draft approached, the coaches scoured the QB class. Washington traded three first-round picks and a second-rounder to move up and take Robert Griffin III—the preferred choice of owner Dan Snyder—second overall. In typical Skins fashion, they took Kirk Cousins—favored by coaching staff—three rounds later, setting themselves up for a future QB controversy.

The Griffin selection forced the coaches to innovate like never before. It quickly became apparent that for all his skills—arm strength, athleticism, speed—Griffin couldn't read a defense. So Kyle set out to make another alteration, stitching in a familiar concept: the zone read.

The staff gathered in the film room one memorable spring afternoon—his assistants joke that Mike locked them inside. They ran through cutups of Tim Tebow's time in Denver, Cam Newton's rookie season in Carolina and Griffin's career at Baylor. When they finally finished that session, Mike told them, "Let's run it back

JOHN MCDONNELL/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES (COUSINS); JORDAN NAHOLOWA'A MURPH (GOFF)

again." To which Kyle, exasperated, replied, "Dad!?!?"

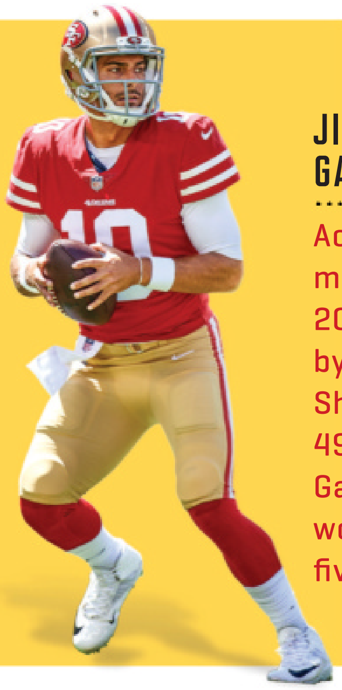
From those sessions came a simplified scheme designed to capitalize on Griffin's strengths. The Redskins mixed outside-zone runs with a heavy emphasis on zone reads and far more play-action than normal, putting their quarterback away from center but not deep in the shotgun—rather, in the pistol formation.

After starting 3–6, the Redskins rattled off seven straight wins. The ground game dominated—just like in Denver, it was built around a sixth-round running back. Alfred Morris ran for 1,613 yards, a tally he would never again approach. Washington gained 2,709 yards on the ground to lead the NFL.

The Redskins finished 28th in total defense and trotted out one of the worst special teams units in the league, but they still made the playoffs. Against the Seahawks in the wild-card round, they started a hobbled Griffin, who had injured his right knee four weeks earlier. In the fourth quarter he blew it out.

MATT RYAN

Ryan was MVP in 2016, his second [and final] season playing under Kyle Shanahan.



JIMMY GAROPPOLO

Acquired in midseason 2017 by Kyle Shanahan's 49ers, Garoppolo won his first five starts.

AL TIELEMANS (RYAN); JORDAN NAHOLOWA'A MURPH (GAROPPOLO)

Even after recovering from the knee injury, Griffin would never again approach the success of that season, and neither would Shanahan and his Fun Bunch, at least not in Washington. After a 3–13 season marked by an inability to expand the passing offense with Griffin under center, a too-late switch to Cousins and an eight-game losing streak to finish the year, they were let go.

AMONG THE offensive coaches, only McVay stayed on to work under Shanahan's replacement, Jay Gruden. The rest of the staff spread out, with branches of the tree sprouting in Cleveland, Atlanta, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Green Bay, Denver and Cincinnati.

Kyle took McDaniel with him to Cleveland in 2014 and hired Mike LaFleur as an offensive assistant. After a 7–9 season—the only season during the 10-year span from 2008 to '17 that Cleveland avoided double-digit losses—they left, Shanahan bristling at the front office's insistence on playing Johnny Manziel.

From Cleveland the crew moved on to Atlanta, where they inherited an established quarterback in Matt Ryan and tasked him with throwing on the move, reinventing once again. In their second season Ryan won MVP honors as the Falcons made the Super Bowl. "You could sense the brainpower in that room," Ryan says. "That pushed us in ways we hadn't been pushed before."

McVay left the Redskins for L.A. in '17, becoming the youngest head coach in NFL history. He hired Matt LaFleur away from the Falcons, and together they designed their own version of the offense. They deployed play-action heavily, fueling Goff's breakout year. One of McVay's assistants, Zac Taylor, was hired as the Bengals' new head coach last winter.

Kyle Shanahan, Mike LaFleur and McDaniel went to San Francisco in '17 and, out of necessity, designed an offense around two tight ends. This season they collected speedy running backs, intending to deploy big-play threats from the backfield. Matt LaFleur, after spending '18 as the offensive coordinator in Tennessee, is now the head coach in Green Bay. When Ryan ran into Aaron Rodgers at a golf tournament, the Packers' QB asked about the system. "You'll love it," Ryan told him.

As for Mike Shanahan, his legacy is complicated, due in large part to his final stop. "I don't believe that [stretch] defined his legacy," Mike LaFleur says. "He's one of the top innovators in pro football, ever." The six QBs who played at least two seasons under the Godfather all made at least one Pro Bowl. No other coach can make that claim. "Matt Ryan, if he never met us, might [still] be a Hall of Famer," McDaniel says. "But he was proof of what was abstract theory: The system makes a tangible difference."

Back at the QB Collective camp, the coaches patrol the field, correcting footwork, fine-tuning releases. McVay tells the prospects stories of Navy SEAL training techniques. Matt LaFleur wheels around on a scooter, a cast on his right leg after he tore his Achilles playing basketball last spring. Drones buzz overhead.

If the coaches closed their eyes, they might be transported back to Redskins Park, when they innovated because they were forced to, because they didn't know better. And they eventually succeeded, perhaps because they had a chance to fail. □

An annuity. ~~It's a contractual financial product sold by financial institutions that is designed to accept and grow funds from an individual once~~ you put money in. It goes to work ~~for you.~~ Then~~, upon annuitization, the financial product~~ pays you back later ~~via a stream of payments at a future period in time. The period of time when an annuity is being funded and before payouts begin is referred to as the accumulation phase. Once pa ents mmence, the co ract s in the annui ati phase.~~

JIBBER
JABBER

LET'S CUT THROUGH THE JIBBER JABBER.

And the doublespeak. The jargon. The gobbledygook that only an insurance industry insider can understand. How? By **offering product** summaries that make sense. A website designed **to cut through** the clutter. And a pledge to communicate to you using **real language,** not insider-speak. All so you can decide which of **our retirement,** benefits, and life products are right for you—with **no surprises.** For more clarity, and less jibber jabber, visit Symetra.com.

SYMETRA®
RETIREMENT | BENEFITS | LIFE

Life Insurance and annuities are issued and employee benefits are insured by Symetra Life Insurance Company. 777 108th Ave. NE, Ste 1200, Bellevue, WA 98004 and are not available in all U.S. states or any U.S. territory.
Symetra® is a registered service mark of Symetra Life Insurance Company.

SCOUT

89
LITTLETON
58
UNGER
60

THINK OF the standings you see here not as predictions but as projections: This is how the 32 NFL teams look entering a season that's sure to produce a slew of unforeseen developments. In fact, they've already started. Entering the summer, I loved the Colts. They were bringing back almost everyone from a 2018 squad that won 10 of its final 12 games.

But then Andrew Luck's mysterious ankle injury became a concern. Major red flag. Too bad, because there's a path for the Colts in the AFC if they're at full strength. The Browns are sexy but inexperienced. The Chiefs have a terrifying offense but serious questions about their defensive back seven. Those same questions kept them out of Super Bowl LIII.

That leaves the team that took Kansas City's spot in that Super Bowl. Yes, picking the Patriots feels boring and lazy. But their defense is much stronger than it was at this time last year, and they're one of the few offenses built around a smashmouth ground game. Oh, and when they're not pounding the rock, they'll rely on Tom Brady, who has still shown no sign of decline.

As for the NFC: New Orleans remains in the same brilliant offensive scheme led by the same brilliant QB, Drew Brees. The Saints' D, while not amazing, is the most talented they've had in the Sean Payton era. Forecasting a Super Bowl showdown between two fortysomething-year-old quarterbacks feels absurd, but those quarterbacks remain elite and are surrounded by two of the league's most complete rosters.

ING REPORTS

BY **ANDY BENOIT**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **SIMON BRUTY**

PROJECTED 2019 STANDINGS & POSTSEASON

AFC

EAST		SOUTH	
PATRIOTS ①	12-4	COLTS ④	10-6
JETS	8-8	TITANS	8-8
BILLS	6-10	TEXANS	7-9
DOLPHINS	4-12	JAGUARS	5-11

NORTH		WEST	
BROWNS ③	11-5	CHIEFS ②	12-4
STEELERS ⑤	10-6	CHARGERS ⑥	10-6
RAVENS	7-9	BRONCOS	7-9
BENGALS	4-12	RAIDERS	5-11

WILD CARD
6 CHARGERS *over* BROWNS 3
4 COLTS *over* STEELERS 5

DIVISIONAL ROUND
4 COLTS *over* CHIEFS 2
1 PATRIOTS *over* CHARGERS 6

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME
PATRIOTS *over* COLTS

NFC

EAST		SOUTH	
EAGLES ④	10-6	SAINTS ②	11-5
COWBOYS	9-7	FALCONS	10-6
GIANTS	4-12	PANTHERS	7-9
REDSKINS	3-13	BUCS	5-11

NORTH		WEST	
VIKINGS ③	11-5	RAMS ①	12-4
PACKERS ⑥	10-6	49ERS ⑤	10-6
LIONS	9-7	SEAHAWKS	7-9
BEARS	7-9	CARDINALS	5-11

WILD CARD
3 VIKINGS *over* PACKERS 6
4 EAGLES *over* 49ERS 5

DIVISIONAL ROUND
1 RAMS *over* EAGLES 4
2 SAINTS *over* VIKINGS 3

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME
SAINTS *over* RAMS

● AFC Seed
● NFC Seed

SUPER BOWL LIV
Feb. 2, 2020 Hard Rock Stadium, Miami

PATRIOTS 27 *over* SAINTS 23

PATRIOTS
12
GRIFFEN
97

NEW AGE

At 42, Brady leads an offense that is, for the first time since 2009, totally Gronkless.

ERICK W. RASCO

AFC
EAST

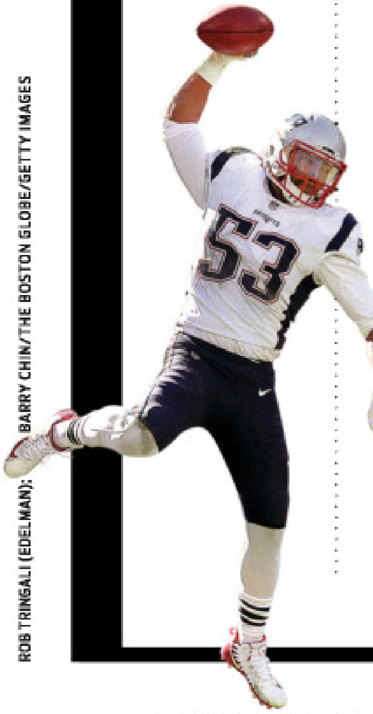
1

NEW ENGLAND

PATRIOTS

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
12–4
2018 RECORD 11–5

SEPT. 8	vs. PIT
SEPT. 15	@ MIA
SEPT. 22	vs. NYJ
SEPT. 29	@ BUF
OCT. 6	@ WAS
OCT. 10	vs. NYG
OCT. 21	@ NYJ
OCT. 27	vs. CLE
NOV. 3	@ BAL
NOV. 10	BYE
NOV. 17	@ PHI
NOV. 24	vs. DAL
DEC. 1	@ HOU
DEC. 8	vs. KC
DEC. 15	@ CIN
DEC. 22 *(Flex)*	vs. BUF
DEC. 29	vs. MIA



ROB TRINGALI (EDELMAN); BARRY CHIN/THE BOSTON GLOBE/GETTY IMAGES

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **ROB GRONKOWSKI IS REPLACED BY REX BURKHEAD. (SORT OF.)** The seventh-year running back doesn't assume Gronk's old tight end duties—veteran Ben Watson and ex-Texan Stephen Anderson do that. But neither of those players command double teams as Gronk did, which means that New England, instead of mainly dictating matchups by aligning its tight end all over the formation, must employ two-back sets to force defenses into more predictable, manipulatable looks. Tailback Sony Michel is primarily a runner and his counterpart, James White, a receiver, which leaves Burkhead as their lone hybrid. When he's paired with another back (including fullback James Develin, who played 36% of the snaps last year in an increasingly potent old-school ground game), defenses will be left guessing about the Patriots' intentions.

× **TOM BRADY LOOKS LIKE TOM BRADY YET AGAIN.** Now 42, the quarterback is more impressive physically than he was in his 30s. Time will eventually catch up to **Brady** ←, but it doesn't look as if that will happen anytime soon.

× **JULIAN EDELMAN BECOMES MORE CRUCIAL.** The receiving corps has depth, but **Edelman** ↑ is the only natural slot man. First-round rookie N'Keal Harry often played inside at Arizona State, but the Pats prefer quick, shifty inside receivers who can take a precisely timed throw from Brady and turn upfield. Without Gronkowski in the middle, Edelman becomes the passing game's fulcrum.

× **J.C. JACKSON SHINES.** The undrafted second-year pro is the consummate New England defensive back. He is physical, adept in man coverage and versatile enough to blanket receivers outside or tight ends inside (including the league's best, Travis Kelce, for much of last year's AFC championship game). With Jackson, a true No. 1 cornerback in Stephon Gilmore, plus a plethora of multiskilled CBs and safeties, the Patriots can do anything and everything in their predominantly man-coverage scheme.

× **AMERICA FINALLY APPRECIATES KYLE VAN NOY.** The sixth-year outside linebacker was the real MVP of Super Bowl LIII. His versatility late in a 13–3 win over the Rams was essential to New England's creative five-man rushes, diverse fronts (**Van Noy** ←, like Dont'a Hightower, can play on the edge or off the ball) and stalwart run defense.

POSITION RANKINGS

Strength	QB 1	RB 5
	WR/TE 20	OL 8
	FRONT 7 20	DB 2

» ***Bottom Line*** The Patriots have to tweak their offensive approach after Gronkowksi's retirement, but history says they'll figure out a way to make it work.

AFC
EAST

NEW
YORK

JETS

2

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **SAM DARNOLD PROGRESSES.** The No. 3 pick from 2018 can play from in and out of the pocket. New coach Adam Gase lives with the occasional interception from **Darnold ↑** because his decisiveness allows Gase's system to mostly operate as designed. Gase has always catered to his QBs. Here, that means loosening the timing on later progression reads and featuring more bootlegs and rollouts to highlight Darnold's on-the-move throwing.

× **LE'VEON BELL THRIVES DOWN THE STRETCH.** This isn't because he is fresh from having sat out '18 but because Gase, who hadn't prioritized the running back position as the offensive architect in Denver, Chicago or Miami, dreams up new ways to use Bell's skills as the season goes on. The Jets complement Bell with receiving backs Ty Montgomery and Trenton Cannon and tight end Chris Herndon (who boosts the offense when he returns from a four-game suspension for a DWI). Their versatile pieces offset the lack of a big-bodied perimeter receiver.

× **FREE-AGENT PICKUP JAMISON CROWDER PAYS OFF.** The passing game goes through speedy wideout Robby Anderson. But Crowder, who prospered from the slot in similar circumstances in Washington, becomes an important cog.

× **OPPONENTS STRUGGLE TO RUN THE BALL.** New York is stout and athletic up front with Leonard Williams and rookie **Quinnen Williams ↓**, the No. 3 pick, from Alabama. New coordinator Gregg Williams takes advantage of this by aligning his tackles more directly over opposing guards, creating hybrid 4–3 and 3–4 fronts that frustrate most run-blocking structures. Free-agent linebacker C.J. Mosley is great at reading these fronts, and he has the long arms and strong hands to shed blocks. The former Raven might not quite be worth the $51 million that the Jets guaranteed him in free agency, but then again, with Avery Williamson out with an ACL injury, Mosley is the only proven three-down linebacker they can rely on.

× **THE PASS D STRUGGLES.** The lack of a quality edge rusher keeps Williams from leaning on his disguised Cover 2 looks, and he has to limit his aggressive interior blitzes because his cornerbacks can't be trusted to cover one-on-one. Trumaine Johnson is coming off a disappointing season, and the Jets have no clear No. 2 corner opposite him.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 18	RB 3 Strength
WR/TE 16	OL 13
FRONT 7 17	DB 29

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
8–8
2018 RECORD 4–12

SEPT. 8	vs. BUF
SEPT. 16	vs. CLE
SEPT. 22	@ NE
SEPT. 29	BYE
OCT. 6	@ PHI
OCT. 13	vs. DAL
OCT. 21	vs. NE
OCT. 27	@ JAX
NOV. 3	@ MIA
NOV. 10	vs. NYG
NOV. 17	@ WAS
NOV. 24	vs. OAK
DEC. 1	@ CIN
DEC. 08	vs. MIA
DEC. 12	@ BAL
DEC. 22	vs. PIT
DEC. 29	@ BUF

ROB TRINGALI (DARNOLD); ERICK W. RASCO

» ***Bottom Line*** The offense improves dramatically with the development of Darnold and the addition of Bell, but the pass defense holds the team back.

AFC
EAST

3

BUFFALO
BILLS

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
6-10
2018 RECORD 6-10

SEPT. 8	@ NYJ
SEPT. 15	@ NYG
SEPT. 22	vs. CIN
SEPT. 29	vs. NE
OCT. 6	@ TEN
OCT. 13	BYE
OCT. 20	vs. MIA
OCT. 27	vs. PHI
NOV. 3	vs. WAS
NOV. 10	@ CLE
NOV. 17	@ MIA
NOV. 24	vs. DEN
NOV. 28	@ DAL
DEC. 8	vs. BAL
DEC. 15	@ PIT
DEC. 22 (Flex)	vs. NE
DEC. 29	vs. NYJ

WHAT LIES AHEAD

✖ **THE GROUND GAME TAKES OFF.** The once-struggling line has four newcomers: powerful ex-Titan Quinton Spain at left guard, nimble ex-Chief Mitch Morse at center, sneakily athletic ex-Redskin/Jet Spencer Long at right guard and second-round rookie Cody Ford (Oklahoma) at right tackle. That allows the Bills to finally get the most out of their backfield talent, which has been upgraded with veteran Frank Gore and jitterbug Devin Singletary, a third-round pick from Florida Atlantic. Both rotate in behind 31-year-old LeSean McCoy, who still changes directions well enough to find daylight consistently. Coordinator Brian Daboll uses his speedy receivers to build on the jet-sweep concepts he dabbled in last year, but his best tactic is the package of run designs involving 237-pound QB **Josh Allen ↑**, who does for Buffalo's rushing attack what Cam Newton does for the Panthers'.

✖ **THE BILLS GO DEEP.** Allen's similarities to Newton extend to his passing. The second-year QB will never have high-end accuracy, but he (mostly) compensates with power throws. Buffalo emphasizes deep drop-backs and downfield routes, where Allen doesn't need to be pinpoint and completions have large payouts.

✖ **ROBERT FOSTER EMERGES.** The undrafted second-year pro from Alabama is the best player in a receiving corps composed mostly of diminutive speedsters. The 6' 2", 196-pound **Foster ↓** can not only stretch the field, but he can also throttle down—an underappreciated skill that enables a speed receiver to get separation.

✖ **THE PASS RUSH IS A PROBLEM.** The Bills are two-deep at every D-line spot, but their only pure pass rusher is bull-rushing ace Jerry Hughes. That's a problem in their straightforward zone scheme, which, like any traditional 4–3, requires a quality four-man rush.

✖ **YOUNG STARS SHINE ON D.** Tre'Davious White, a 2017 first-rounder, reinforces that he's a true No. 1 corner. Inside linebacker Tremaine Edmunds builds on the improved play recognition he flashed as a rookie, while OLB Matt Milano, in his third year, continues to show a knack for finishing plays near the ball. Both can cover, especially in zone. They don't quite rise to the level of the Luke Kuechly–Thomas Davis tandem that Sean McDermott had when he was the coordinator in Carolina, but they allow him to expand his third-down pressure concepts.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB (*Weakness*)	30
RB	13
WR/TE	27
OL	26
FRONT 7	28
DB	11

» ***Bottom Line*** Behind their revamped offensive line, emerging stars on defense and a deep rushing attack, the Bills show improvement, but they're still a year away from playoff contention.

GREG NELSON (ALLEN); BRETT CARLSEN/GETTY IMAGES

AFC
EAST

MIAMI

DOLPHINS

4

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
4–12
2018 RECORD 7–9

SEPT. 8	vs. BAL
SEPT. 15	vs. NE
SEPT. 22	@ DAL
SEPT. 29	vs. LAC
OCT. 6	BYE
OCT. 13	vs. WAS
OCT. 20	@ BUF
OCT. 28	@ PIT
NOV. 3	vs. NYJ
NOV. 10	@ IND
NOV. 17	vs. BUF
NOV. 24	@ CLE
DEC. 1	vs. PHI
DEC. 8	@ NYJ
DEC. 15	@ NYG
DEC. 22	vs. CIN
DEC. 29	@ NE

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **JOSH ROSEN BECOMES THE FRANCHISE QUARTERBACK.** Miami has little talent around the 2018 first-round pick, but it's more than Rosen had in Arizona, where he floundered as a rookie behind the NFL's worst (and most injury-riddled) offensive line. When comfortable, Rosen is a rhythmic, precision passer. That's the style of quarterbacking pro football is built on, and it's a prerequisite in first-time coordinator Chad O'Shea's system, which mimics the one he learned as the receivers coach in New England for 10 years. Rosen has a bumpy ride this season, but the Dolphins come away thinking that once they find more dependable wideouts (veteran Kenny Stills is their only one), a pure slot receiver (Albert Wilson is serviceable but not quite ideal) and stronger O-linemen, Rosen will emerge.

× **KENYAN DRAKE DISAPPOINTS.** Fans have high hopes for **Drake** ↑, a deceptively smooth runner and effective receiver who draws comparisons with James White. Indeed, Drake is dangerous, but not as reliable or refined as the Patriots' pass-catching tailback. A good chunk of Drake's touches go to 2018 fourth-rounder Kalen Ballage.

× **THE DEFENSE STRUGGLES.** It won't be as bad as last year, when Dolphins opponents produced more big plays than Broadway. New coach Brian Flores, the former New England coordinator, replaces the old regime's zone-based scheme with a Patriots-style system that is heavy on single-high man coverage. But the transition is rough, as most of the holdover personnel are suited to the old scheme. Linebacker is the shakiest position. Young incumbents Raekwon McMillan and Jerome Baker, and especially undisciplined veteran Kiko Alonso, are run-and-chase 'backers in a system that favors thumpers.

× **FLORES ADJUSTS.** Instead of forcing his defensive, predominantly man-to-man scheme upon personnel mostly better suited to a zone, Flores employs more basic Cover 3 looks, particularly early on. He gradually becomes more comfortable with his safeties, especially second-year Swiss army knife **Minkah Fitzpatrick** →. The coach phases in more man coverage, taking his chances at corner, where the Dolphins, beyond playmaker Xavien Howard, are not particularly deep or diverse.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 27	RB 29
WR/TE 25	OL 25
Weakness FRONT 7 31	DB 24

ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (DRAKE); MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

» Bottom Line These Dolphins are rebuilding, but they are not tanking, and a difficult season will be made brighter when they pull off a few upset wins behind their new quarterback.

© Center on Addiction / Partnership for Drug-Free Kids

I'VE TRIED EVERYTHING TO STOP MY CHILD FROM USING DRUGS

I'M AT MY WIT'S END

WE CAN HELP.

TEXT 55753

TO CHAT WITH A SPECIALIST.

Partnership™
for Drug-Free Kids
Where families find answers

If you find yourself in a situation you never thought you'd be in, we're here to help. No matter what you and your family are going through, we can help you take on your child's drug or alcohol problem.

Connect with a Parent Specialist for free.
Call 1-855-DRUGFREE or Text 55753

AFC
NORTH

CLEVELAND BROWNS

1

SI'S 2019 PREDICTION
11–5
2018 RECORD 7-8-1

SEPT. 8	vs. TEN
SEPT. 16	@ NYJ
SEPT. 22	vs. LAR
SEPT. 29	@ BAL
OCT. 7	@ SF
OCT. 13	vs. SEA
OCT. 20	BYE
OCT. 27	@ NE
NOV. 3	@ DEN
NOV. 10	vs. BUF
NOV. 14	vs. PIT
NOV. 24	vs. MIA
DEC. 1	@ PIT
DEC. 8	vs. CIN
DEC. 15	@ ARI
DEC. 22	vs. BAL
DEC. 29	@ CIN

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE OFFENSE LIVES UP TO THE HYPE.** Cleveland's weapons fit well together. Among the receivers, Odell Beckham Jr. is dangerous in many ways, but especially at the deep-intermediate levels, which expands coach Freddie Kitchens's passing game. Rashard Higgins also has sound chemistry with quarterback Baker Mayfield, particularly on dig and corner routes. Jarvis Landry is unpolished but tenacious underneath. And Antonio Callaway presents a terrifying vertical dimension. Aligning Callaway opposite Beckham occupies both safeties, helping the entire attack, including tight end David Njoku and deceptively fast and elusive tailback **Nick Chubb →**.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 12	RB 19
Strength WR/TE 2	OL 19
FRONT 7 9	DB 16

× **BAKER MAYFIELD IS AN MVP CANDIDATE.** The second-year QB extends plays with his feet, but only when necessary, relying first on his outstanding timing and accuracy, especially on seam balls and underneath throws from spread formations. More impressive are the passes Mayfield does not make; he has a veteran's sense for getting off of bad reads. And when he does get fooled into the occasional turnover, he continues to be aggressive.

× **GREG ROBINSON IS A WEAK LINK.** When this offense struggles, the left tackle is usually involved. Yes, the No. 2 pick in 2014 was surprisingly reliable late last season, but as happened in previous stops with the Lions and the Rams, Robinson ultimately proves to be a slow-twitch, mentally unreliable pass-blocker.

× **CLEVELAND HAS A TOP 10 DEFENSE.** This is a big leap for the NFL's 30th-ranked unit in 2018. Expect plenty of slot blitzes because new coordinator Steve Wilks loves them and also because the Browns don't have a pure inside cover guy. They do, however, have a young corner, Denzel Ward, who can stay with quick receivers and another, second-round rookie Greedy Williams from LSU, who—they hope—can handle big receivers. Add in athletic linebackers Joe Schobert and Christian Kirksey, and Wilks has the necessary back-end pieces for his six-man zone coverages.

× **MYLES GARRETT GOES OFF.** Violent hands, a sudden first step and flexible hips translate to big production now that **Garrett ↑**, a third-year end, is surrounded by stellar vets such as Olivier Vernon and Sheldon Richardson. Almost half of Garrett's sacks come from inside, where he's a tick more explosive.

NICK CAMMETT/DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (GARRETT); LAURA HEALD

» ***Bottom Line*** The Browns, everyone's preseason darlings, feel too good to be true, but they have no major weaknesses, a star at quarterback and many players with huge upsides.

AFC
NORTH

2

PITTSBURGH

STEELERS

SI'S 2019 PREDICTION
10–6
2018 RECORD 9-6-1

SEPT. 8	@ NE
SEPT. 15	vs. SEA
SEPT. 22	@ SF
SEPT. 30	vs. CIN
OCT. 6	vs. BAL
OCT. 13	@ LAC
OCT. 20	BYE
OCT. 28	vs. MIA
NOV. 3	vs. IND
NOV. 10	vs. LAR
NOV. 14	@ CLE
NOV. 24	@ CIN
DEC. 1	vs. CLE
DEC. 8	@ ARI
DEC. 15	vs. BUF
DEC. 22	@ NYJ
DEC. 29	@ BAL

WHAT LIES AHEAD

✖ **PITTSBURGH'S OFFENSE REMAINS POTENT BUT INCONSISTENT.** Ben Roethlisberger can play with either perfect discipline or haphazard timing—there's no predicting which from down to down. The passing game can use clever intertwined routes underneath or fall into basic iso routes out of spread-empty formations. Despite an outstanding line and a diverse ground game, this offense is more about making individual plays than establishing a rhythm. The Steelers could get away with this when Antonio Brown and Le'Veon Bell were still on the roster, but now their skill players are good but not great, and the schematic inconsistency is more damaging.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 7	RB 27
WR/TE 17	OL 3 *Strength*
FRONT 7 6	DB 22

✖ **JUJU SMITH-SCHUSTER FILLS ANTONIO BROWN'S SHOES.** The third-year receiver is better inside than outside, but he's potent anywhere, and is great at making contested catches. Like Brown in 2018, **Smith-Schuster** ← aligns all over the formation, including by himself on the weak side, where he influences coverages by commanding double teams.

✖ **A ROOKIE CORNERBACK BECOMES IMPORTANT.** Pittsburgh has a solid traveling No. 1 corner in Joe Haden, but concerns about a No. 2 persist. Former Chief Steven Nelson is porous in matchup coverage, and Artie Burns, entering his fourth season, is officially a first-round bust. The Steelers wants to play more man, but that's only possible if third-round pick Justin Layne, a physical press-cover artist from Michigan State, steps up.

✖ **THE INTERIOR PASS COVERAGE IMPROVES.** Slot man Mike Hilton remains disruptive, including as a blitzer. With the additions of first-round rookie **Devin Bush** ↑ (Michigan) and ex-Ram Mark Barron, the Steelers have athletic pass-defending linebackers who enable them to return to their two-'backer nickel package. That's a good thing, because they lack the secondary depth to keep playing a three-safety dime.

✖ **PITTSBURGH'S DEFENSE REMAINS A TOP 10 UNIT.** The secondary's flaws are mostly hidden by one of the NFL's most athletic fronts. The biggest names are on the edge (T.J. Watt and Bud Dupree), but the brilliance is inside: Linemen Stephon Tuitt and especially Cameron Heyward are powerful, sound technicians, while Javon Hargrave is the rare nosetackle who can be featured on stunts and twists, including against the run.

SMITH-SCHUSTER
19

FRED VUICH (BUSH); DAVID E. KLUTHO

» ***Bottom Line*** The Steelers can mask most of their weaknesses, but the defense has issues with coverage and the offense needs more schematic consistency to reach its potential.

AFC
NORTH

BALTIMORE

RAVENS

3

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **BALTIMORE'S AFC-LEADING DEFENSE DECLINES (THOUGH NOT AS MUCH AS EXPECTED).** The front seven was ravaged this past offseason. The Ravens most likely anticipated losing OLB Za'Darius Smith and DL Brent Urban to free agency, but were surprised to see star linebacker C.J. Mosley and future Hall of Fame edge defender Terrell Suggs accompany them out the door. Most of the departed have been replaced in-house, resulting in a front seven that is less skilled and has little depth. Still, tackles Brandon Williams and Michael Pierce, though perhaps less effective than they were a few years ago, remain stalwart run-stoppers, and coordinator Wink Martindale continues to unleash his patented "fire zone" blitzes, where five men rush in a disguised pressure while six stay back in matchup zone coverage.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB	RB
31	30
WR/TE	OL
30	12
FRONT 7	DB
26	1 Strength

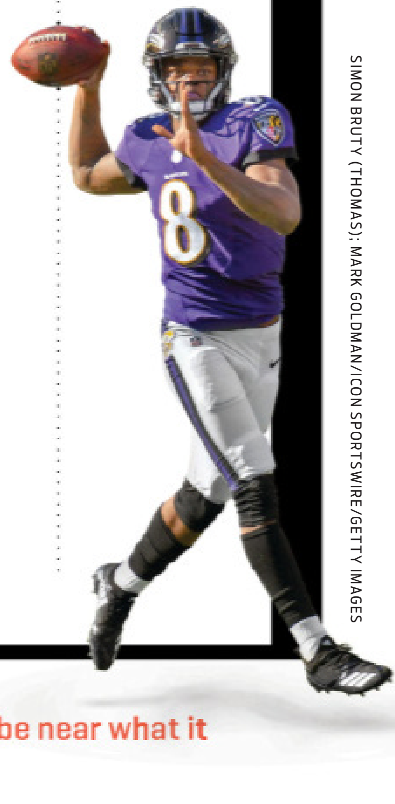
× **MARLON HUMPHREY BECOMES A STAR.** The third-year corner was quietly terrific last season. He's key because Baltimore's matchup zone coverage often plays out like man-to-man, so the corners must be able to shadow receivers one-on-one. Baltimore's can. Jimmy Smith and Brandon Carr remain viable. But Humphrey plays the paramount role because he can travel with most No. 1 receivers.

× **EARL THOMAS SHOWCASES HIS SAVVY.** In Seattle, **Thomas** ↑ was mostly a deep-centerfield safety. But last season Baltimore's scheme hinged on the now-departed Eric Weddle moving around in aggressive disguises. Coaches push Thomas toward that style of play more and more, especially because fellow safety Tony Jefferson, though better in the box than in space, is a versatile counterbalance.

× **THE OFFENSE RUNS HOT AND COLD.** **Lamar Jackson**↓, the electrifying second-year quarterback, shows flashes of pocket poise and accuracy, but his rushing prowess—coupled with his growing pains as a drop-back passer and the callowness of his receiving corps—keeps the Ravens in run-first mode. New coordinator Greg Roman designs the same kind of ground game that he did for Colin Kaepernick with the 49ers in 2012; it is built on read-option looks, pull-blocking and multi-tight-end movement, with jet-sweep action added to the mix. It amounts to a lot of smoke and mirrors, which is one reason why this offense, despite strong rushing numbers, remains inconsistent.

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
7–9
2018 RECORD 10–6

SEPT. 8	@ MIA
SEPT. 15	vs. ARI
SEPT. 22	@ KC
SEPT. 29	vs. CLE
OCT. 6	@ PIT
OCT. 13	vs. CIN
OCT. 20	@ SEA
OCT. 27	BYE
NOV. 3	vs. NE
NOV. 10	@ CIN
NOV. 17	vs. HOU
NOV. 25	@ LAR
DEC. 1	vs. SF
DEC. 8	@ BUF
DEC. 12	vs. NYJ
DEC. 22	@ CLE
DEC. 29	vs. PIT



SIMON BRUTY (THOMAS); MARK GOLDMAN/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

» ***Bottom Line*** This defense won't fall apart, but after major departures it won't be near what it was a year ago. That's a problem, given the unevenness of Baltimore's offense.

AFC
NORTH

4

CINCINNATI

BENGALS

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
4–12
2018 RECORD 6–10

Date	Game
SEPT. 8	@ SEA
SEPT. 15	vs. SF
SEPT. 22	@ BUF
SEPT. 30	@ PIT
OCT. 6	vs. ARI
OCT 13	@ BAL
OCT. 20	vs. JAX
OCT. 27 *[In London]*	@ LAR
NOV. 3	BYE
NOV. 10	vs. BAL
NOV. 17	@ OAK
NOV. 24	vs. PIT
DEC. 1	vs. NYJ
DEC. 8	@ CLE
DEC. 15	vs. NE
DEC. 22	@ MIA
DEC. 29	vs. CLE

WHAT LIES AHEAD

✖ **ANDY DALTON REMAINS UP-AND-DOWN IN ZAC TAYLOR'S RAMS-STYLE SYSTEM.** The shifts, motion and misdirection concepts brought by the new coach play perfectly to Dalton's sharp presnap awareness, but the condensed formations help defenses disguise coverages and blitzes, exacerbating Dalton's careerlong struggles when the picture changes after the snap.

✖ **JOE MIXON RUSHES FOR MORE THAN 1,300 YARDS.** **Mixon** ↓ would gain even more with a sound offensive line. Though 2018 first-round center Billy Price progresses, the season-ending shoulder injury to first-round pick Jonah Williams hurts. Veteran Cordy Glenn's move back to left tackle leaves a massive hole at guard—a critical position in Taylor's outside zone scheme, which will likely be filled with 2018 reserve Christian Westerman. Mixon, however, is gifted enough to compensate, and he builds on the improved decisiveness he ran with late in 2018. Still, the ground game remains a week-to-week proposition.

✖ **TYLER BOYD'S PRODUCTION DECLINES.** The shifty slot receiver had a breakout 2018 in which he caught 76 balls for 1,028 yards and seven touchdowns—and, just as important, regularly drew double teams inside. But his lack of top-end speed becomes more problematic in Taylor's scheme; **Boyd** ← still prospers underneath, but Taylor's condensed formationing puts the slot receiver in more downfield route combinations.

✖ **THE BACK END OF THE BENGALS' DEFENSE CRUMBLES IN THE MIDDLE.** Refreshed by playing for first-time defensive coordinator Lou Anarumo, Cincy's maddeningly inconsistent line stabilizes around tackle Geno Atkins. But that is not enough to offset limitations at linebacker and strong safety. Third-round rookie 'backer Germaine Pratt, who played some safety at North Carolina State, gives Cincy its long-missing man-coverage answer for tailbacks. But tight ends pose major problems, as strong safety Shawn Williams's performance remains wildly inconsistent and 200-pound free safety Jessie Bates, while solid on deep coverage, is too small for those matchups.

✖ **WILLIAM JACKSON SHOWS HIS VALUE.** The new regime lets the corner occasionally travel with smaller, faster receivers. The Bengals sign Jackson to a long-term deal after he plays out his fifth-year option season in 2020.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB	RB
28	8
WR/TE	**OL** *Weakness*
21	32
FRONT 7	**DBs**
29	14

JOHN GRIESHOP/GETTY IMAGES (BOYD); KIRK IRWIN/ GETTY IMAGES

» *Bottom Line* This franchise looks rejuvenated under Taylor, the Bengals' first new coach since 2003. But more talent is needed, especially on defense, before that translates into victories.

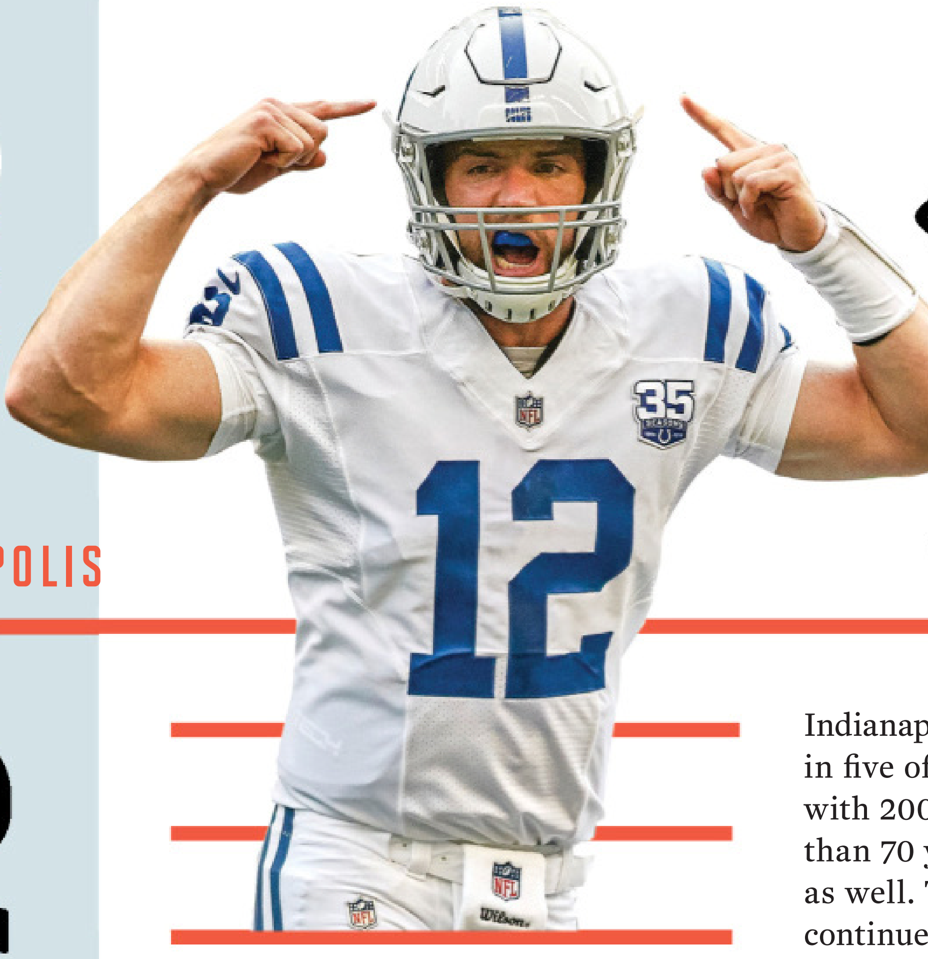
INDIANAPOLIS

COLTS

1

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
10–6
2018 RECORD 10–6

SEPT. 8	@ LAC
SEPT. 15	@ TEN
SEPT. 22	vs. ATL
SEPT. 29	vs. OAK
OCT. 6	@ KC
OCT. 13	BYE
OCT. 20	vs. HOU
OCT. 27	vs. DEN
NOV. 3	@ PIT
NOV. 10	vs. MIA
NOV. 17	vs. JAX
NOV. 21	@ HOU
DEC. 1	vs. TEN
DEC. 8	@ TB
DEC. 16	@ NO
DEC. 22	vs. CAR
DEC. 29	@ JAX



WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **INDY IS FINE AT QB.** If and when the enigmatic ankle injury of **Andrew Luck ↑** heals, the Colts will have a 30-year-old superstar quarterback who can make plays late in the down but also, as he showed last year, win consistently via quick-strike passes in coach Frank Reich's system. If Luck is out, the Colts will rely on football's best backup QB, Jacoby Brissett, a classic big, strong-armed pocket passer.

× **COLTS RECEIVERS BECOME FANTASY DARLINGS.** Reich's scheme uses T.Y. Hilton in ways that help the 183-pounder avoid press coverage. It also features vertical routes in the red zone, particularly out of trips formations. In 2018 this helped Eric Ebron lead all tight ends with 13 touchdowns, and it now benefits wideout **Parris Campbell →**, a speedy second-round rookie from Ohio State, as well as 6' 4" Devin Funchess, who underachieved in Carolina but was coveted by Indianapolis in free agency.

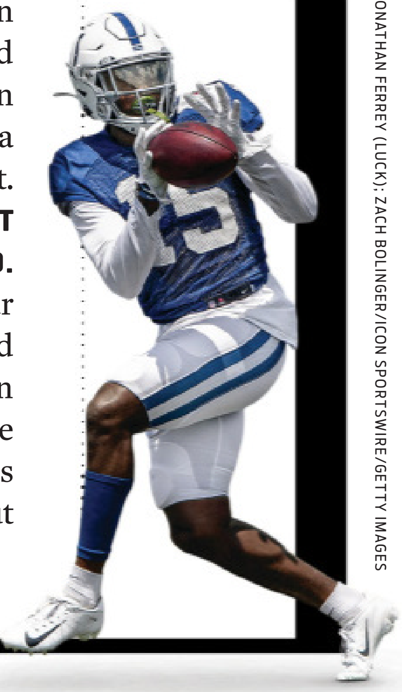
× **THE GROUND GAME STABILIZES.** Last year the rushing attack was hit or miss. Indianapolis ran for more than 155 yards in five of their games (including three with 200-plus) but finished with fewer than 70 yards on the ground five times as well. This year, though, behind the continued growth of powerful yet nimble interior blockers Quenton Nelson and Ryan Kelly. The Colts expand their rushing scheme. This leads to steadier production from Marlon Mack, Nyheim Hines and Jordan Wilkins.

× **MATT EBERFLUS BECOMES ONE OF 2020'S HOTTEST HEAD COACHING CANDIDATES.** In 2018, his first season as defensive coordinator, Eberflus's unit allowed the fewest points over the final 10 weeks. A big reason was the increase in blitzes from the linebacker and slot, often in front of zone coverage (as opposed to the more common man-to-man). Those concepts continue, but the Colts are less dependent on them, as new acquisitions Justin Houston (signed from the Chiefs) and second-round rookie Ben Banogu (TCU) provide a greater edge-rushing threat.

POSITION RANKINGS

Strength QB 3	RB 17
WR/TE 7	OL 4
FRONT 7 21	DB 8

× **KENNY MOORE, THE RICHEST SLOT CORNER IN HISTORY, LOOKS UNDERPAID.** In nickel defense the undrafted third-year pro from Valdosta (Ga.) State, who signed a four-year, $36 million contract extension in June, is a fervid blitzer and ace zone defender. And, thanks to his long arms and surprising physicality, he's also stout as an outside corner in base situations.



JONATHAN FERREY (LUCK); ZACH BOLINGER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

» ***Bottom Line*** The Colts are strong in key places: quarterback, offensive line, linebacker, secondary and coaching. Anything short of a Super Bowl appearance will feel like a disappointment.

AFC
SOUTH

2

TENNESSEE
TITANS

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
8–8
2018 RECORD 9–7

SEPT. 8	@ CLE
SEPT. 15	vs. IND
SEPT. 19	@ JAX
SEPT. 29	@ ATL
OCT. 6	vs. BUF
OCT. 13	@ DEN
OCT. 20	vs. LAC
OCT. 27	vs. TB
NOV. 3	@ CAR
NOV. 10	vs. KC
NOV. 17	BYE
NOV. 24	vs. JAX
DEC. 1	@ IND
DEC. 8	@ OAK
DEC. 15	vs. HOU
DEC. 22	vs. NO
DEC. 29	@ HOU

ROBIN ALAM/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (BYARD); JEFF HAYNES

WHAT LIES AHEAD

✖ **TENNESSEE ATTACKS WITH THE NFL'S MOST SCHEMATICALLY AGGRESSIVE AND DIVERSE DEFENSE.** With quality man or zone corners in Logan Ryan, Adoree' Jackson and Malcolm Butler, multidimensional safeties Kevin Byard and Kenny Vaccaro, and sharp passing-down linebackers Rashaan Evans, Jayon Brown and Wesley Woodyard, the Titans expand their scheme and win with big defensive plays. They mix and match concepts from coach Mike Vrabel's years as Texans coordinator and defensive coordinator Dean Pees's days with the Ravens. By doing so, Tennessee combats any and all styles of offense. They become the rare defense whose disguises reach far enough that zone coverage can look like man-to-man.

✖ **KEVIN BYARD SHOWS HE IS FOOTBALL'S BEST ALL-AROUND SAFETY.** Other than the Ravens' Earl Thomas, **Byard ↑** is the rangiest pure deep centerfielder in the NFL, and he's even better as a blitzer, box defender and at covering tight ends. Tennessee's defense is built around Byard, who in July earned a five-year, $70.5 million contract extension.

✖ **NEW COORDINATOR ARTHUR SMITH'S OFFENSE IS A TEST FOR MARCUS MARIOTA, AND HE DOESN'T ACE IT.** Smith, the former tight ends coach, would love to play with two TEs and take a run-first approach that simplifies the defensive looks for the up-and-down **Mariota ←**. But tight ends Delanie Walker and Jonnu Smith are coming off injuries, and the Titans boast new receivers A.J. Brown (a second-round pick from Ole Miss) and Adam Humphries (signed from Tampa Bay for $36 million over four years), as well as improving perimeter target Corey Davis. That pushes Tennessee toward the three-receiver sets in which Mariota, outside of two-minute situations, has been inconsistent. So the Titans' fate, more than ever, rides on the performance of a QB whose mechanics are faulty.

✖ **DERRICK HENRY WALKS AFTER THE SEASON.** The thundering fourth-year runner, who had 585 rushing yards in the final four games last year (1,059 for the season), comes back to earth, as his limited acceleration and ability to change direction make him overly dependent on his blocking. The increase in three-receiver sets means that Dion Lewis takes more snaps from Henry, who is allowed to walk in free agency.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 22	RB 24
WR/TE 19	OL 21
FRONT 7 16	DB 3 Strength

» ***Bottom Line*** Mariota continues to struggle because of poor mechanics and mismatched personnel, but a dynamic, big-play defense keeps Tennessee in the race for a wild-card berth.

AFC
SOUTH

HOUSTON

TEXANS

3

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
7–9
2018 RECORD 11–5

SEPT. 9	@ NO
SEPT. 15	vs. JAX
SEPT. 22	@ LAC
SEPT. 29	vs. CAR
OCT. 6	vs. ATL
OCT. 13	@ KC
OCT. 20	@ IND
OCT. 27	vs. OAK
NOV. 3	@ JAX
NOV. 10	BYE
NOV. 17	@ BAL
NOV. 21	vs. IND
DEC. 1	vs. NE
DEC. 8	vs. DEN
DEC. 15	@ TEN
DEC. 22	@ TB
DEC. 29	vs. TEN

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **NEW OFFENSIVE LINEMEN CREATE NEW POSSIBILITIES.** After the front five felled this team in 2018, the Texans invested a first-round pick in tackle Tytus Howard of Alabama State and a second-rounder in tackle Max Scharping of Northern Illinois. Both these small-school linemen are projects, but offensive line coach Mike Devlin, who quietly got this unit to play better as last season progressed, is a skilled teacher. Talent will no longer limit what this line is capable of. True, the rookies must make a quantum leap and the interior group is below average, but coach Bill O'Brien no longer feels compelled to employ seven-man protections on so many drop-backs.

× **DESHAUN WATSON IMPROVES.** With an O-line he can trust more, **Watson ↑** becomes steadier in the pocket, which is vital for any NFL QB, even a mobile one. Watson offsets his less-than-optimal arm strength by throwing with anticipation, which requires that he read the field expertly. He still has a ways to go, but as he becomes more of a pocket passer and less of a scrambler, the game starts slowing down for him.

× **AS JADEVEON CLOWNEY GOES, SO GOES THE TEXANS' DEFENSE.** J.J. Watt is unequivocally Houston's best player, but the versatility of **Clowney ↓**, who was displeased to receive the franchise tag and has been holding out, is the primary source of this scheme's dimension. Besides being a dominant run defender, his interior pass rushing from various standup positions defines the Texans' pressure concepts, including their patented five-man front. Remove Clowney and the defense becomes too reliant on eighth-year end Whitney Mercilus, who is coming off a very quiet 2018.

× **THE SECONDARY WOES CONTINUE.** It won't be as bad as it was in the playoff loss to the Colts in January, but the Texans, who employ a lot of two-deep matchup zones, still struggle in coverage downfield. Corner Johnathan Joseph is 35, and his veteran savvy cannot entirely compensate for his diminished speed. Slot man Aaron Colvin continues to be a disappointment after coming over from Jacksonville in 2018 as a high-priced free agent. New pickup Bradley Roby (one year, $10 million) remains inconsistent—which, the Texans come to realize, is why the Broncos let their 2014 first-round pick walk.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 14	RB 21
WR/TE 13	OL 31 Weakness
FRONT 7 3	DB 30

JAMIE SCHWABEROW (WATSON); ROB LEITER/GETTY IMAGES

» Bottom Line The Texans are not without flaws, but that's been true in each of their five previous seasons under O'Brien, four of which resulted in a winning record.

SI'S 2019 PREDICTION
5–11
2018 RECORD 5–11

SEPT. 8	vs. KC
SEPT. 15	@ HOU
SEPT. 19	vs. TEN
SEPT. 29	@ DEN
OCT. 6	@ CAR
OCT. 13	vs. NO
OCT. 20	@ CIN
OCT. 27	vs. NYJ
NOV. 3	vs. HOU
NOV. 10	BYE
NOV. 17	@ IND
NOV. 24	@ TEN
DEC. 1	vs. TB
DEC. 8	vs. LAC
DEC. 15	@ OAK
DEC. 22	@ ATL
DEC. 29	vs. IND

AFC
SOUTH

4

JACKSONVILLE
JAGUARS

WHAT LIES AHEAD

THE DEFENSE BOUNCES BACK . . . TO A POINT. Having first-round edge rusher Josh Allen from Kentucky opposite the unheralded Yannick Ngakoue and alongside veteran Calais Campbell reignites this four-man rush, leading to sacks and turnovers that the Jags missed out on last year. Losses at safety (Tashaun Gipson) and linebacker, however, keep them from being as dominant as they were in 2017.

TELVIN SMITH'S SABBATICAL HURTS. Speed and awareness at linebacker are essential to Jacksonville's Cover 3 zone foundation. Myles Jack still delivers, but the D suffers without Smith, who says he's taking 2019 off for personal reasons.

JALEN RAMSEY HAS CONTRACT DRAMA. He's the rare corner who can handle No. 1 receivers of all speeds and sizes one-on-one. So coordinator Todd Wash goes on the attack, calling a few more pressure designs, which means more man coverage—which only works because of **Ramsey** ←. He will want the team to give him a long-term extension, but 2020 cap issues make that difficult.

NICK FOLES LOOKS MORE LIKE A JOURNEYMAN THAN A SUPER BOWL MVP. The Jaguars simply don't have enough talent around the mechanical 30-year-old QB, whom they signed to a four-year, $88 million contract. Second-year wideout D.J. Chark improves on the outside, but not enough to elevate a receiving corps composed of role players. New coordinator John DeFilippo knows how to scheme for **Foles** ↑ from their days in Philadelphia. But without dynamic receiving backs and tight ends, the wrinkles help only so much.

DEFILIPPO IS AGAIN PUSHED TO RUN THE BALL. His reluctance to lean on the ground game with a bad offensive line in Minnesota got him fired last year; now in Jacksonville, he will again be asked to emphasize the run by the NFL's most old-school offensive regime, led by executive VP of football ops Tom Coughlin and coach Doug Marrone. The Jaguars have built around Leonard Fournette, who has proved to be an inconsistent power runner. But fortunately for DeFilippo, Jacksonville's line, though not as strong as some think, is more than adequate. The ground game improves in the second half of the season, once the Jags begin to rely more on man-blocking than zone-blocking.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB	RB
25	31
WR/TE 32 Weakness	OL 14
FRONT 7 11	DB 7

SIMON BRUTY (FOLES); MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

» **Bottom Line** With iffy offensive personnel, the Jaguars must rely on big plays from their defense. Even with a unit as talented as theirs, it's hard to win that way week after week.

AFC
WEST

KANSAS
CITY

CHIEFS

1

SI'S 2019 PREDICTION
11–5
2018 RECORD 12–4

SEPT. 8	@ JAX
SEPT. 15	@ OAK
SEPT. 22	vs. BAL
SEPT. 29	@ DET
OCT. 6	vs. IND
OCT. 13	vs. HOU
OCT. 17	@ DEN
OCT. 27	vs. GB
NOV. 3	vs. MIN
NOV. 10	@ TEN
NOV. 18 *(in Mexico City)*	@ LAC
NOV. 25	BYE
DEC. 1	vs. OAK
DEC. 8	@ NE
DEC. 15	vs. DEN
DEC. 22	@ CHI
DEC. 29	vs. LAC

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE 2018 MVP IMPROVES.** Last season **Patrick Mahomes↑** put up some numbers—5,097 yards to go along with a league-high 50 touchdowns—that were amazing, especially when you take into account the inaccuracy and pocket impatience he shows on one or two drop-backs each week. These glitches might be a by-product of his abundant talent; Mahomes can simply do—and therefore attempt—tricks that others can't. But as the Packers have learned with Aaron Rodgers, there's a fine line between electric and undisciplined at quarterback. Andy Reid's scheme is immensely more intricate than Green Bay's has been, which helps the coach keep his wunderkind on track. Mahomes gradually develops into an aggressive on-schedule quarterback who only freestyles as a Plan B, giving the Chiefs the best of all worlds.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 2	RB 32 *Weakness*
WR/TE 3	OL 9
FRONT 7 19	DB 28

× **K.C. ELEVATES ITS RPO GAME.** This year Reid's offense, already the most schematically diverse in football, integrates more run-pass options. The RPOs play perfectly to Mahomes's quick and flexible release, as well as to the speed and athleticism of this offense's key pass catchers, receiver Tyreek Hill and tight end Travis Kelce.

× **THE DEFENSE TAKES A SMALL STEP UP.** Even after overhauling half the lineup, this is a flawed unit, marred mainly by inconsistent field-reading linebackers who can either play only in traffic (Reggie Ragland) or in space (Darron Lee, Dorian O'Daniel), and by corners who struggle in man-to-man coverage. But new coordinator Steve Spagnuolo at least partially spackles over these holes with disguised five-man pressures in front of two-deep match-zone coverages.

The unusual combination works better some weeks than others, but even a mild amount of progress makes a difference, given that Kansas City's NFL-best scoring offense can be counted on for 30 points a game.

× **THE D-LINE ASCENDS.** **Chris Jones →**, whose explosive power makes him the best interior pass rusher not named Aaron Donald, builds on last year's 15½-sack season, and the players around him also bring juice. Former Seahawk Frank Clark moves multidirectionally with rare quickness at defensive end, and second-year pro Derrick Nnadi blossoms into an outstanding three-down inside fighter, bringing about the long-awaited (though still only modest) improvements to Kansas City's historically hot-and-cold run defense.

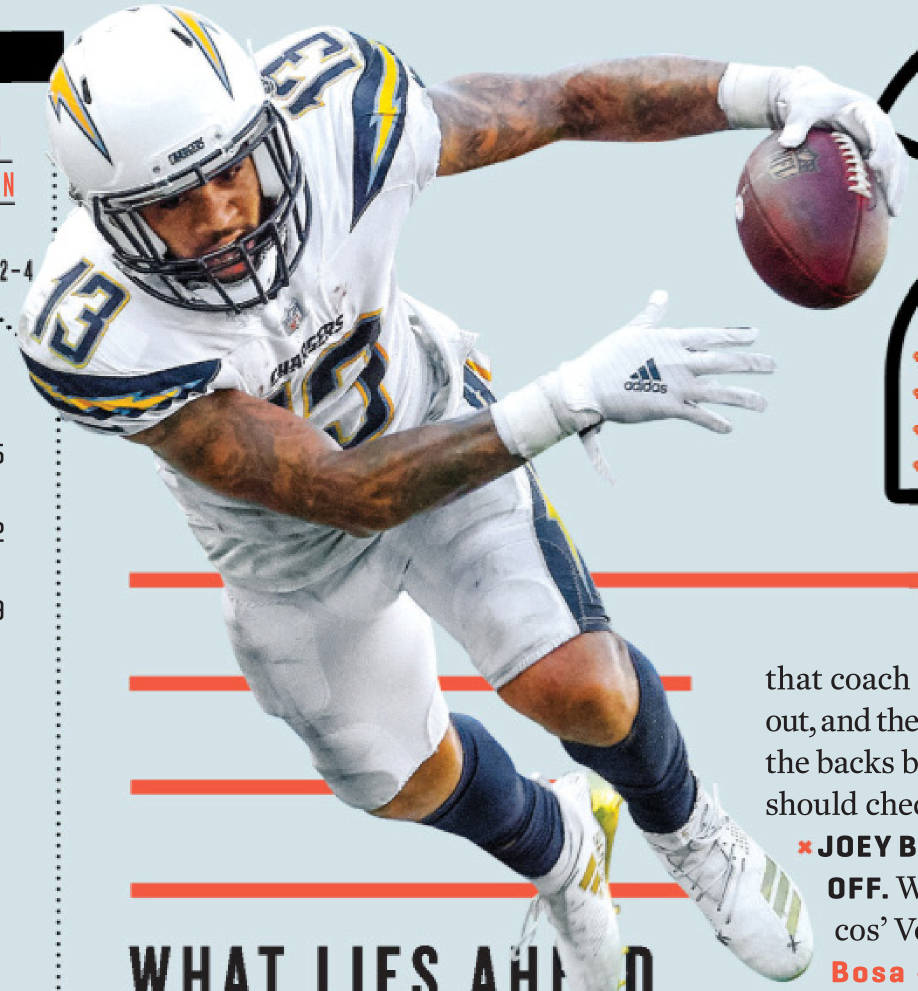
DAVID E. KLUTHO (MAHOMES); JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES

» ***Bottom Line*** This offense, with Mahomes leading the way, is the NFL's most talented and highly schemed. A defense that is merely decent makes K.C. a Super Bowl contender.

AFC
WEST

2

LOS ANGELES
CHARGERS



SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
10–6
2018 RECORD 12–4

SEPT. 8	vs. IND
SEPT. 15	@ DET
SEPT. 22	vs. HOU
SEPT. 29	@ MIA
OCT. 6	vs. DEN
OCT. 13	vs. PIT
OCT. 20	@ TEN
OCT. 27	@ CHI
NOV. 3	vs. GB
NOV. 7	@ OAK
NOV. 18 [in Mexico City]	vs. KC
NOV. 25	BYE
DEC. 1	@ DEN
DEC. 8	@ JAX
DEC. 15	vs. MIN
DEC. 22 [Flex]	vs. OAK
DEC. 29	@ KC

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE OFFENSE HUMS ALONG.** L.A.'s lineup is not without concerns. Veteran left tackle Russell Okung could miss significant time early on after suffering a pulmonary embolism on June 1. Guards Dan Feeney and Michael Schofield are vulnerable when forced to move laterally. At receiver, the top of the pecking order is strong with **Keenan Allen ↑**, budding star Mike Williams and multitooled tight end Hunter Henry, but there is almost no proven depth. Still, as long as Philip Rivers is at the helm, the offense is dangerous. The 37-year-old doesn't have the playoff wins of revered veterans such as Tom Brady and Drew Brees, but he is very much in their class. Rivers controls games at the line of scrimmage, and he throws with tremendous accuracy and anticipation.

× **THE GROUND GAME PROVES RESILIENT.** Melvin Gordon is holding out, but the fifth-year tailback, while good, is replaceable. The Chargers have a well-constructed rushing attack built largely (but not exclusively) on the man-to-man blocking designs that coach Anthony Lynn knows inside-out, and they generate receiving yards from the backs because Rivers knows when he should check down quickly.

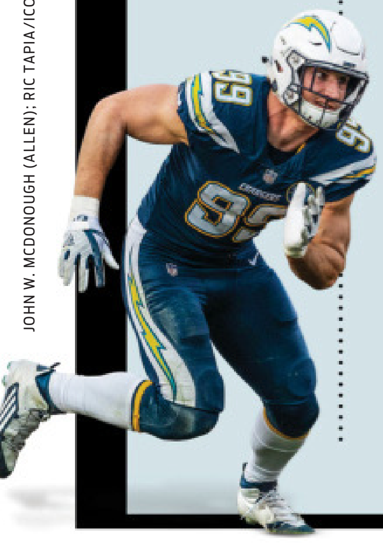
× **JOEY BOSA AND MELVIN INGRAM GO OFF.** With the exception of the Broncos' Von Miller and Bradley Chubb, **Bosa ↓** and Ingram are the NFL's best edge tandem. Bosa's unique blend of quickness and strength is amplified by clever technique. Ingram is uncannily twitchy moving in any direction. Either man can slide inside, allowing L.A. to align them side by side, where they're explosive on stunts and twists. With the development of last year's Day 2 picks, edge rusher Uchenna Nwosu and tackle Justin Jones, plus this year's first-rounder, Jerry Tillery of Notre Dame, the Chargers have a strong enough rotation to fuel their crucial four-man pass rush. That helps minimize the inconsistency that has hindered this D the past few winters.

× **GUS BRADLEY KEEPS RUSHING FOUR.** The defensive coordinator began to venture outside his hallmark Cover 3 zone scheme last season, incorporating more tactical variety on third down. But he still blitzed less than any defensive play-caller, and that reliance on a traditional four-man rush remains after All-Pro safety Derwin James's foot injury leaves the Chargers with no stud to build blitzes around.

POSITION RANKINGS

Strength

QB 5	RB 15
WR/TE 6	OL 27
FRONT 7 8	DB 13



JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (ALLEN); RIC TAPIA/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

» ***Bottom Line*** The Chargers have made enough improvements on defense to offset their mild concerns on offense, putting them at the front of the AFC's second tier of contenders.

AFC WEST

DENVER

BRONCOS

3

SI'S 2019 PREDICTION

7–9

2018 RECORD 6–10

SEPT. 9	@ OAK
SEPT. 15	vs. CHI
SEPT. 22	@ GB
SEPT. 29	vs. JAX
OCT. 6	@ LAC
OCT. 13	vs. TEN
OCT. 17	vs. KC
OCT. 27	@ IND
NOV. 3	vs. CLE
NOV. 10	BYE
NOV. 17	@ MIN
NOV. 24	@ BUF
DEC. 1	vs. LAC
DEC. 8	@ HOU
DEC. 15	@ KC
DEC. 22 (Flex)	vs. DET
DEC. 29	vs. OAK

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE DEFENSE IMPROVES, BUT IS NOT YET BEARS-LIKE.** First-time head coach Vic Fangio, hired from Chicago, where he was the coordinator, is football's best defensive schemer. His system is predicated on two-deep safety presnap looks that morph into blurry hybrid coverages with both man and zone principles. His calls, with all their wrinkles, are difficult for a QB to process and for an offensive coordinator to anticipate. High-level linebacker play, particularly on passing downs, can propel Fangio's scheme into the stratosphere. The Broncos, unfortunately, are average at linebacker. Sixth-year veteran Todd Davis and 2018 fourth-rounder Josey Jewell have both sharpened their pass protection, but are still better suited to stop the run.

× **VON MILLER AND BRADLEY CHUBB ARE FOOTBALL'S BEST EDGE-RUSHING TANDEM.** **Miller** ↑ predominantly works off the weak side and Chubb off the strong side. And less sexy than their pass rushing but still important: They have the athleticism to play in space on first and second down, which Fangio's scheme will ask them to do against certain slot formations.

× **CHRIS HARRIS BECOMES A TRAVELING CORNER.** Known for his mastery in the slot, Harris gets his wish to travel with the opposing team's top receiver. Fangio normally doesn't use corners this way, but Harris is far and away his top cover man. Aided by the scheme's natural safety help outside, the ninth-year star has more cracks at interceptions. As for Harris's old nickel-slot duties, they fall to Bryce Callahan, who thrived in that role under Fangio in Chicago.

× **JOE FLACCO STRUGGLES.** The 12th-year quarterback is not an ideal fit for new coordinator Rich Scangarello's system, which is predicated on outside zone runs that also set up crafty mutlilevel route combinations. With functional mobility and a still-lively arm, **Flacco** → can run the offense, but to be truly successful he must overcome two problems. The first is Denver's ho-hum receiving corps. The second is that he is playing behind a weak line that features 30-year-old left guard Ronald Leary, who's coming off a right Achilles injury; 2016 fifth-rounder Connor McGovern, who's still settling in at center; right guard Dalton Risner, a second-round rookie from Kansas State; and right tackle Ja'Wuan James, who constantly needs help in pass protection.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB	26
RB	10
WR/TE	28
OL	29
Strength FRONT 7	4
DB	12

JAMIE SCHWABEROW (MILLER); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES

» ***Bottom Line*** GM John Elway believes his team can win now—why else acquire a 34-year-old QB and hire a 60-year-old head coach?—but the roster simply has too many soft spots.

SI'S 2019 PREDICTION
5–11
2018 RECORD 4–12

SEPT. 9	vs. DEN
SEPT. 15	vs. KC
SEPT. 22	@ MIN
SEPT. 29	@ IND
OCT. 6 *[in London]*	vs. CHI
OCT. 13	BYE
OCT. 20	@ GB
OCT. 27	@ HOU
NOV. 3	vs. DET
NOV. 7	vs. LAC
NOV. 17	vs. CIN
NOV. 24	@ NYJ
DEC. 1	@ KC
DEC. 8	vs. TEN
DEC. 15	vs. JAX
DEC. 22 *[Flex]*	@ LAC
DEC. 29	@ DEN

4

AFC WEST

OAKLAND RAIDERS

WHAT LIES AHEAD

THE OFFENSE UNDERACHIEVES. New receivers Antonio Brown and Tyrell Williams are both at their best working the intermediate levels on deeper drop-back passes. Those require aggressive throws later in the down. That's not the forte of **Derek Carr** ↑. His best intermediate work is done on seam routes, where the ball comes out earlier. Other throws require more pocket patience than Carr can consistently muster. At least this year, however, Carr's comfort in the pocket doesn't waver quite so quickly, thanks to the improvement of second-year left tackle Kolton Miller (a movable but determined pass blocker) and the arrival at right tackle of former Patriot Trent Brown, who solidifies what had been the line's weakest spot.

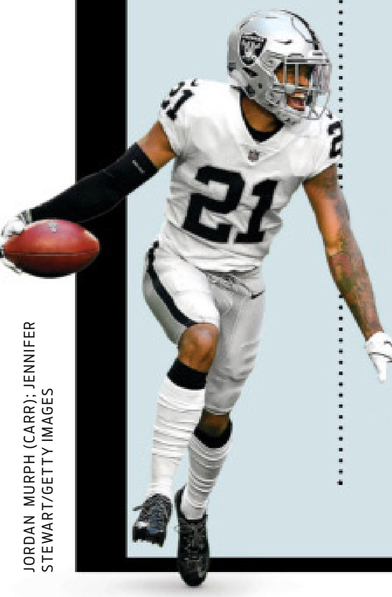
JARED COOK IS MISSED. He wasn't a great blocker, but the tight end, now a Saint, could split out wide and catch passes, giving teeth to Jon Gruden's 1 × 3 trips-receiver sets. Gruden's passing scheme is much more modern than people realize, at least on shorter throws, where he makes great use of formation wrinkles and intersecting releases. But it's hard to scheme a comprehensive passing game without a receiving threat at tight end.

THE DEFENSE REMAINS STALE. The pass rush is to blame. Instead of blitzing, coordinator Paul Guenther prefers to play two-deep zone coverage, which works only if your front four can disrupt the quarterback. The addition of the No. 4 pick, Clelin Ferrell from Clemson, isn't enough; the Raiders still need at least one—if not two or three—other edge rushers. Second-year defensive tackles Maurice Hurst and P.J. Hall continue to progress, but neither is destructive enough to spearhead a D-line.

GAREON CONLEY BREAKS OUT. The 2017 first-round corner was quietly stellar for much of last season. **Conley** ← has a good sense for route concepts outside. With Daryl Worley back and rookies Trayvon Mullen (second round, Clemson) and Isaiah Johnson (fourth round, Houston) adding depth, plus ex-Lion Nevin Lawson replacing the up-and-down Nick Nelson in the slot, Oakland is stronger at corner. Even better are the new safeties, former Ram Lamarcus Joyner and first-round pick Johnathan Abram (Mississippi State). The Raiders can win on the back end, encouraging Guenther to occasionally deploy some of the creative blitzes he learned as a coach with the Bengals.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 20	RB 25
WR/TE 12	OL 20
Weakness FRONT 7 32	DB 25



JORDAN MURPH (CARR); JENNIFER STEWART/GETTY IMAGES

» *Bottom Line* The Raiders are better on paper than they were a year ago, but the gap between them and the elite of their division, the Chiefs and the Chargers, remains sizable.

RECHARGED

Wentz's return from injury will get a boost from a key addition to the receiving corps.

NFC
EAST

1

PHILADELPHIA

EAGLES

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
10–6
2018 RECORD 9–7

SEPT. 8	vs. WAS
SEPT. 15	@ ATL
SEPT. 22	vs. DET
SEPT. 26	@ GB
OCT. 6	vs. NYJ
OCT. 13	@ MIN
OCT. 20	@ DAL
OCT. 27	@ BUF
NOV. 3	vs. CHI
NOV. 10	BYE
NOV. 17	vs. NE
NOV. 24	vs. SEA
DEC. 1	@ MIA
DEC. 9	vs. NYG
DEC. 15	@ WAS
DEC. 22	vs. DAL
DEC. 29	@ NYG

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **CARSON WENTZ REENTERS MVP DISCUSSIONS.** **Wentz ←** last season did not drop off as steeply from his 2017 MVP-caliber campaign as many believe. His completion percentage rose from 60.2 to 69.6, and his yards per game increased from 253.5 to 279.5. What decreased were his game-breaking plays. Philadelphia lacked speed at wide receiver, and Wentz was a little more willing to take the easy underneath throws. Though that's positive for the QB's growth, the signing of deep threat DeSean Jackson rekindles the downfield playmaker in Wentz, who is one of the best in this regard, particularly from within the pocket. Jackson's presence also opens the rest of the field, aiding Philly's masterly two- and three-receiver route combinations, which can be unstoppable against zone coverage.

× **O-LINE PROBLEMS INTRUDE.** Two years ago the Eagles challenged the Cowboys for the best front five in football. Now durability concerns plague 37-year-old left tackle Jason Peters, who missed 20% of the snaps in 2018. First-round rookie left tackle Andre Dillard from Washington State, Peters's eventual replacement, needs a year to develop. Left guard has been a persistent weak spot. At right guard the mobile Brandon Brooks is coming off a right Achilles tear last January. Lane Johnson is football's most gifted right tackle—he borderline dominated J.J. Watt in Week 16 last year—but his mechanics don't always match his talent, causing his performance to fluctuate.

× **SIDNEY JONES BECOMES THE DEFENSE'S MOST SIGNIFICANT PLAYER.** Philadelphia's MVP on D remains thundering tackle Fletcher Cox. But **Jones ↑**, a third-year corner, answers key questions. He's effective in the slot (a position he was not necessarily projected to play), and he's an insurance policy at left corner should Jalen Mills, who is coming off a left-foot injury, and Avonte Maddox continue to show susceptibility to double moves.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB	8
RB	9
WR/TE	11
OL	6
Strength FRONT 7	5
DB	19

× **DEREK BARNETT PLAYS A VITAL ROLE.** This defense is still built around a four-man pass rush that allows the secondary to be aggressive. Replacing Michael Bennett with Malik Jackson is a notable downgrade, and Chris Long's retirement hurts their depth. Philadelphia needs **Barnett ←**, a 6' 3", 259-pound end, to regain the form he showed before his season-ending left-shoulder injury last October.

ROB TRINGALI (WENTZ, BARNETT); JOHN JONES/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

» Bottom Line The trenches will tell the tale. Philly has a deep, talented roster, but the offense can be derailed by a shaky O-line, and if the pass rush doesn't produce, the secondary will be exposed.

NFC
EAST

DALLAS

COWBOYS

2

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
9–7
2018 RECORD 10–6

SEPT. 8	vs. NYG
SEPT. 15	@ WAS
SEPT. 22	vs. MIA
SEPT. 29	@ NO
OCT. 6	vs. GB
OCT. 13	@ NYJ
OCT. 20	vs. PHI
OCT. 27	BYE
NOV. 4	@ NYG
NOV. 10	vs. MIN
NOV. 17	@ DET
NOV. 24	@ NE
NOV. 28	vs. BUF
DEC. 5	@ CHI
DEC. 15	vs. LAR
DEC. 22	@ PHI
DEC. 29	vs. WAS

WHAT LIES AHEAD

DAK PRESCOTT'S CONTRACT STATUS BECOMES A DISTRACTION. Talks drag on because the fourth-year quarterback is difficult to appraise. **Prescott ↓** does many things well; he commands the field in spread-empty formations, makes the occasional big-time throw and poses a threat as a perimeter runner, keeping edge defenders from attacking down on Dallas's zone runs. And this offense, which features the league's best foundational back (Ezekiel Elliott) and a top O-line, is built around its rushing attack. Then there are the negatives: Prescott's arm is merely adequate, and he's not always great at reading a field quickly or making anticipation passes. Also, after playing in a limited scheme composed of iso routes, it's anyone's guess how he'd perform in a more modern offense with advanced formations and intertwined route combinations. (It also remains to be seen if new coordinator Kellen Moore will adopt such a scheme. Most young coaches do, but Moore, 30, spent his entire pro career in predecessor Scott Linehan's more circumscribed system.) The Cowboys' position is complicated by a potential cap crunch, because they also face contract questions with Elliott (who has been holding out in training camp), receiver Amari Cooper and some top defensive players.

JASON WITTEN PICKS UP WHERE HE LEFT OFF. Returning from the broadcast booth, the 37-year-old tight end assumes a more limited role. But the presence of Witten, whose game has always been built on technique, helps stabilize the offense.

JAYLON SMITH AND LEIGHTON VANDER ESCH BECOME FOOTBALL'S BEST LINEBACKER DUO. **Smith ↑** plays the Bobby Wagner role in the Seahawks-style scheme of coordinators Rod Marinelli and Kris Richard. He is the primary blitzer and, in man coverage, the running back defender. Vander Esch is their K.J. Wright—the bigger glider who can battle tight ends. And both of these 'backers play fast.

THE COWBOYS FINISH IN THE TOP FIVE ON D. In addition to great linebackers, Dallas has a deep four-man front and a talented, fundamentally sound secondary, led by cornerback Byron Jones. The Cover 3–based zone scheme can easily shift to man, including on third downs, when the Cowboys like to bring a "robber" (often their underappreciated safety Jeff Heath) down across the middle.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 19	RB 1
WR/TE 15	OL 1 Strength
FRONT 7 2	DB 9

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (SMITH); GREG NELSON

» **Bottom Line** It's hard to make too bold a forecast without knowing the scheme of first-time offensive coordinator Moore, but the Cowboys have playoff-level talent.

NFC
EAST

NEW
YORK

GIANTS

3

SI’S 2019
PREDITION
4–12
2018 RECORD 5–11

SEPT. 8	@ DAL
SEPT. 15	vs. BUF
SEPT. 22	@ TB
SEPT. 29	vs. WAS
OCT. 6	vs. MIN
OCT. 10	@ NE
OCT. 20	vs. ARI
OCT. 27	@ DET
NOV. 4	vs. DAL
NOV. 10	@ NYJ
NOV. 17	BYE
NOV. 24	@ CHI
DEC. 1	vs. GB
DEC. 9	@ PHI
DEC. 15	vs. MIA
DEC. 22	@ WAS
DEC. 29	vs. PHI

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **SAQUON BARKLEY BECOMES FOOTBALL’S BEST TAILBACK.** On run designs, **Barkley ↑** is not quite as efficient or disciplined as the Cowboys’ Ezekiel Elliott, but he has an unparalleled ability to create his own space. With east-west fluidity and thick thighs that allow him to break tackles and burst downhill from any angle, the 6-foot, 233-pound second-year star draws the first legitimate comparisons to Barry Sanders. And remember, Sanders never dominated as a receiver the way Barkley does.

× **NEW YORK HAS A QB CONTROVERSY.** With Corey Coleman out with an ACL injury and Golden Tate suspended four games for a PED violation, the Giants open the season with the NFL’s worst receiving corps. Also, their offensive tackles lack the anchor strength (Nate Solder) or quickness (Mike Remmers) to secure the edges. Eli Manning’s struggles with accuracy and messy-pocket decision-making worsen. But fans who want a QB change must wait. Head coach Pat Shurmur knows that Manning’s high football IQ allows New York to check in and out of plays at the line of scrimmage, which is critical in an offense built around its mismatch-making pieces, Barkley and tight end Evan Engram. Those adjustments are the Giants’ only hope on offense, and they would lose that by giving the ball to first-round rookie Daniel Jones from Duke.

× **THE DEFENSE ATTACKS.** After using safe zone coverage to survive the growing pains of his young defensive backs last year, coordinator James Bettcher dips into the bag of blitzes that defined his playcalling in Arizona. He can do this because he is more comfortable with the coverage now that veteran Antoine Bethea is at free safety. Bettcher also trusts the route-jumping prowess of cornerback Janoris Jenkins and is more confident in the starter opposite him, be it first-round rookie DeAndre Baker (Georgia) or 2018 supplemental third-rounder Sam Beal. This helps a D thin on proven edge rushers.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 23	RB 2 Strength
WR/TE 31	OL 30
FRONT 7 18	DB 23

× **THE RUN D DOMINATES.** **B.J. Hill ←** and Dalvin Tomlinson, already one of the league’s best young defensive linemen tandems, are bolstered by the arrival of first-round rookie Dexter Lawrence (Clemson). The Giants align in condensed defensive fronts, leaving opponents with no option other than to run outside, where they must contend with speedy linebacker Alec Ogletree.

JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES (BARKLEY); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES

» ***Bottom Line*** The offense is saddled with iffy tackles and inferior wideouts, so the Giants need to get big plays from a defense that is good but not great. That makes for a long season.

NFC
EAST

WASHINGTON

REDSKINS

4

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **DWAYNE HASKINS TAKES OVER (SOONER OR LATER) AND STRUGGLES.** Almost any rookie quarterback would—especially one who started just 14 games, as first-round pick **Haskins ↑** did at Ohio State. Washington's system, with its bevy of intertwined receiver releases and multi-option route combinations, is crafty and well-coached, but it requires a knack for detail that a QB can't develop overnight.

× **LINE PROBLEMS SINK THE OFFENSE.** Even as Haskins's field vision improves, his performance wavers behind unsteady pass protection, particularly on his left. Tackle Trent Williams's absence hurts, as late veteran signing Donald Penn, 36, looks too old and 2018 third-rounder Geron Christian looks too young. The instability there also damages the efforts to salvage the career of former Giants tackle Ereck Flowers, who-had shown hopeful signs after shifting to guard under O-line coach Bill Callahan.

× **THE OFFENSE GOES INSIDE.** With one of the NFL's worst perimeter receiving corps, the passing game continues to operate mainly over the middle, relying on receiving back Chris Thompson, tight ends Jordan Reed and Vernon Davis, and second-year pro Trey Quinn, the Redskins' intriguing new starting slot receiver.

× **OPPONENTS ATTACK THE DEFENSIVE MIDDLE.** Free-agent signee Landon Collins is a high-caliber, fifth-year strong safety who consistently locates the ball and blankets backs and tight ends in coverage. But Colllins's versatility goes only so far in a scheme that's light on blitzing and built on traditional man and zone coverages. The former Giant can't compensate for the team's unpolished linebackers and free safeties.

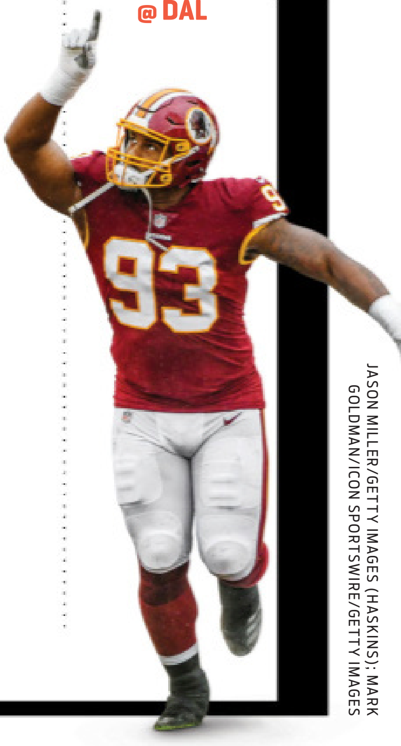
× **THE D-LINE IS A STRENGTH.** First-round rookie Montez Sweat (Mississippi State) provides flashes of the edge-rushing oomph that has long been missing opposite underappreciated end Ryan Kerrigan. **Jonathan Allen →** and Da'Ron Payne, both recent first-round picks from Alabama, form one of football's best interior tandems. Both play with strength, effort and advanced technique. Line coach Jim Tomsula gets great mileage out of young and little-known backups Tim Settle and Caleb Brantley. To highlight their talent at the position, the Skins frequently align their D-tackles over opposing guards, creating what football wonks call an "even" front—an uncommon look that is tough to run against.

POSITION RANKINGS

Weakness	QB 32	RB 16
	WR/TE 29	OL 28
	FRONT 7 25	DB 20

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
3–13
2018 RECORD 7–9

SEPT. 8	@ PHI
SEPT. 15	vs. DAL
SEPT. 23	vs. CHI
SEPT. 29	@ NYG
OCT. 6	vs. NE
OCT. 13	@ MIA
OCT. 20	vs. SF
OCT. 24	@ MIN
NOV. 3	@ BUF
NOV. 10	BYE
NOV. 17	vs. NYJ
NOV. 24	vs. DET
DEC. 1	@ CAR
DEC. 8	@ GB
DEC. 15	vs. PHI
DEC. 22	vs. NYG
DEC. 29	@ DAL



JASON MILLER/GETTY IMAGES (HASKINS); MARK GOLDMAN/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

» ***Bottom Line*** The defense, though flawed, is better than meets the eye, but that's hardly enough to offset an offense that has a rookie QB, porous blocking and a lack of downfield threats.

FULL
GARAGE?

See how much you could save on insurance for your truck, motorcycle, RV, boat and more.

GEICO®

geico.com | 1-800-442-9253 | Local Office

Some discounts, coverages, payment plans and features are not available in all states or all GEICO companies. Motorcycle and ATV coverages are underwritten by GEICO Indemnity Company. Boat and PWC coverages are underwritten by GEICO Marine Insurance Company. GEICO is a registered service mark of Government Employees Insurance Company, Washington, D.C. 20076; a Berkshire Hathaway Inc. subsidiary. © 2017 GEICO

MINNESOTA

VIKINGS

1

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE OFFENSE THRIVES.** Its new outside-zone system fits quarterback Kirk Cousins, who ran the scheme at Washington. The line improves with the addition of mobile first-round center Garrett Bradbury from North Carolina State; unjustly maligned third-year pro Pat Elflein transitions well from center to left guard; and ex-Titan Josh Kline brings a welcome adequacy to the right guard spot. New coordinator Kevin Stefanski uses creative route combinations, particularly out of bunch- and stack-receiver alignments. This creates clearer reads, allowing Cousins to make the bold, anticipatory throws that are his strong suit.

× **ADAM THIELEN AND STEFON DIGGS COMBINE FOR MORE THAN 2,500 YARDS.** Both are true No. 1 receivers. **Thielen ↑** is athletic and a master technician. Diggs brings explosive change of direction. Minnesota's lack of receiving depth entices defenses to double both of them, but Stefanski counters this by often aligning Diggs and Thielen on the same side, opposite tight ends Kyle Rudolph and second-round rookie Irv Smith Jr. from Alabama.

× **HEAD COACH MIKE ZIMMER'S DEFENSE RECAPTURES ITS DOMINANCE.** Built on an aggressive split-safety matchup zone coverage known as quarters, the Vikings continue to aggressively challenge receivers and tight ends. Cornerbacks press while safeties play low. A stingy run defense, led by veteran nosetackle Linval Joseph, creates more third-and-long situations in which Zimmer selectively but efficiently employs his disguised overloaded blitzes. All-world safety **Harrison Smith ↓**, with his shrewd presnap movements and postsnap instincts, remains the defense's key player.

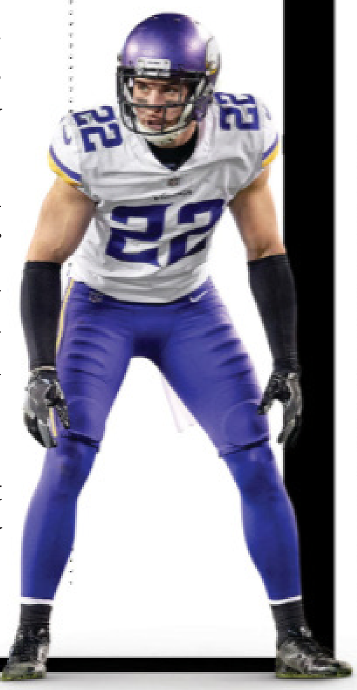
× **CORNERBACK DEPTH PAYS OFF.** In 2018 Minnesota's downfield coverage set up many of its 50 sacks, which tied for third most in the league. That formula continues in '19, as fervid boundary corner Xavier Rhodes regains his form after an injury-riddled '18 campaign, while second-year corner Mike Hughes, despite coming off a torn left ACL, steals playing time from solid No. 2 corner Trae Waynes and slot men Mackensie Alexander (passing downs) and Jayron Kearse (running downs). This versatility and wealth of talent give the Vikings an answer for every type of receiving corps.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB	RB
16	26
WR/TE	OL
5	23
FRONT 7	DB
12	4 Strength

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
11–5
2018 RECORD 8-7-1

SEPT. 8	vs. ATL
SEPT. 15	@ GB
SEPT. 22	vs. OAK
SEPT. 29	@ CHI
OCT. 6	@ NYG
OCT. 13	vs. PHI
OCT. 20	@ DET
OCT. 24	vs. WAS
NOV. 3	@ KC
NOV. 10	@ DAL
NOV. 17	vs. DEN
NOV. 24	BYE
DEC. 2	@ SEA
DEC. 8	vs. DET
DEC. 15	@ LAC
DEC. 23	vs. GB
DEC. 29	vs. CHI



ROB TRINGALI (THIELEN); ROBIN ALAM/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

» Bottom Line With a defense that's still in its prime and two top receivers, the Vikings look more like the team that played for the NFC title in 2017 than the one that missed the playoffs last year.

MEET
TEACHER
JESSICA
Save the Children
100 YEARS

Photo Credit: Save the Children / Rachel Palmer

One book changed her life.

Jessica's world is now wide open because she can read. She attends a school sponsored by Save the Children – and wants to be just like her teacher one day. For 100 years, Save the Children has been ensuring children's needs are met, in the U.S. and around the world. See how one small act can change the life of a child.

Learn more at savethechildren.org/change

CHANGING A LIFE LASTS A LIFETIME

NFC
NORTH

GREEN
BAY

PACKERS

2

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
10–6
2018 RECORD 6-9-1

SEPT. 5
@ CHI
SEPT. 15
vs. MIN
SEPT. 22
vs. DEN
SEPT. 26
vs. PHI
OCT. 6
@ DAL
OCT. 14
vs. DET
OCT. 20
vs. OAK
OCT. 27
@ KC
NOV. 3
@ LAC
NOV. 10
vs. CAR
NOV. 17
BYE
NOV. 24
@ SF
DEC. 1
@ NYG
DEC. 8
vs. WAS
DEC. 15
vs. CHI
DEC. 23
@ MIN
DEC. 29
@ DET

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **AFTER AN UP-AND-DOWN START, GREEN BAY'S OFFENSE BECOMES ONE OF THE LEAGUE'S MOST EXPLOSIVE.** **Aaron Rodgers** ↑ acclimates—well enough—to new coach Matt LaFleur's scheme. Under Mike McCarthy, Rodgers was rarely asked to play on schedule, which contributed to the offense's inconsistency over the last two years. But LaFleur demands precision from his future Hall of Famer. Green Bay's unbalanced and condensed formations, presnap motions, first-down play-actions and intertwined route combinations play to Rodgers's sharp football IQ while regulating his reads and timing. His lethal accuracy returns.

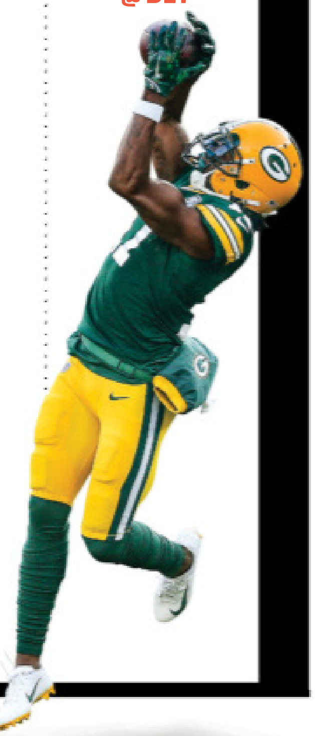
×**DAVANTE ADAMS'S ROLE EVOLVES, BUT HE REMAINS THE FOCUS OF THE PASSING ATTACK.** With receivers Geronimo Allison, Marquez Valdes-Scantling and Equanimeous St. Brown all 6' 3" or taller, the deceptively shifty 6' 1" **Adams** → must play slightly out of position in the slot. No problem. In LaFleur's scheme, the slot receiver attacks downfield as much as he does underneath, which perfectly suits the sixth-year pro. Adams had 1,386 yards in 2018; he has a similar receiving total this year.

× **COORDINATOR MIKE PETTINE'S DEFENSE REMAINS BOOM-OR-BUST.** This is common when a scheme is built on disguise, coverage diversity and occasional blitzes by corners and safeties. While opponents find it hard to anticipate what the Packers' DBs will do, the complexity leads to lapses in execution. Still, Pettine's approach works more often than not, thanks largely to the sterling young cover-corner duo of Kevin King and Jaire Alexander, who can be matched one-on-one against big and quick receivers, respectively.

× **THE PACKERS GENERATE MORE SACKS AND TURNOVERS.** A top-notch run defense creates more obvious passing situations in which Pettine can deploy his disguises and pressures. He preaches destruction more than discipline, with defenders taught to defeat their blocker first and worry about their run gap later. Green Bay has the talent on the defensive line to play this way. Kenny Clark, a 315-pound mega-athlete, is an elite talent at tackle, and first-round pick Rashan Gary, a hybrid edge player from Michigan, shows promise. Unheralded players Dean Lowry, Tyler Lancaster and Montravius Adams provide excellent line depth.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 6	RB 28
WR/TE 14	OL 5 *Strength*
FRONT 7 23	DB 6



SIMON BRUTY (RODGERS); DYLAN BUELL/GETTY IMAGES

» ***Bottom Line*** Coming off two losing seasons, the Pack is back—especially after Rodgers masters the precision passing offense implemented by his new coach.

OFFICIALLY LICENSED NFL PRODUCT

Football Magically
FLOATS and SPINS
in mid-air above the lighted base!

Steelers
Steelers
Steelers
Steelers

Base Lights Up!

Shown smaller than actual size of about 8 in. H x 6½ in. W; football is 6½ in. W.

CHOOSE YOUR FAVORITE TEAM!

CELEBRATE YOUR **FAVORITE TEAM** LIKE NEVER BEFORE

This unique football **hovers and spins** in mid-air with the use of hidden electro magnets—and it features the colors and logos of the *team of your choice*. Sellout demand is expected, so act now to acquire the **Levitating Football** honoring your favorite team at $199.99* each, payable in four installments of just $49.99, the first due before shipment. Your purchase is backed by our 365-day money-back guarantee. Send no money now. Simply return the Reservation Application today, indicating your choice of team!

*For information on tax you may owe to your state, go to bradfordexchange.com/use-tax

49ERS	28548
BEARS	29833
BENGALS	30165
BILLS	30163
BRONCOS	30286
BROWNS	30166
BUCCANEERS	30172
CARDINALS	30161
CHARGERS	30169
CHIEFS	29743
COLTS	30168
COWBOYS	27758
DOLPHINS	29834
EAGLES	30289
FALCONS	30162
GIANTS	29835
JAGUARS	29744
JETS	30171
LIONS	29836
PACKERS	28549
PANTHERS	30164
PATRIOTS	30287
RAIDERS	29821
RAMS	30170
RAVENS	29837
REDSKINS	28550
SAINTS	28551
SEAHAWKS	27644
STEELERS	27645
TEXANS	30167
TITANS	30173
VIKINGS	29822

Officially Licensed and Only Available from the Bradford Exchange
www.bradfordexchange.com/levitatingnfl

Officially Licensed by NFL Properties LLC
Levitation technology in this product has been licensed from Levitation Arts Inc. under U.S. and international patents. See www.levitationarts.com/patent-notice

©2019 BGE 01-30590-001-BIMPO2

TO RESERVE YOUR LEVITATING FOOTBALL

Please write the team name of your choice and its number (see above).

TEAM NAME AND NUMBER: ____________________

RESERVATION APPLICATION **SEND NO MONEY NOW**

THE BRADFORD EXCHANGE
COLLECTIBLES

9345 Milwaukee Avenue · Niles, IL 60714-1393

YES. Please reserve the **LEVITATING FOOTBALL** for me as described in this announcement.
Please Respond Promptly

Mrs. Mr. Ms. ____________________
Name (Please Print Clearly)
Address ____________________
City ____________ State ____________ Zip ____________
Email (optional) ____________________

01-30590-001-E53292

*Plus a total of $24.99 shipping and service, plus sales tax, per football; see bradfordexchange.com. Limited-edition presentation restricted to 295 casting days. Please allow 4-6 weeks after initial payment for shipment. Sales subject to product availability and order acceptance.

NFC
NORTH

DETROIT LIONS

3

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE "DETROIT PATRIOTS" LABEL TAKES ON NEW LEGITIMACY.** The defense of coach Matt Patricia, in his second season after coming from New England, takes shape in pure Patriots mold: big, interchangeable linemen, thumping linebackers and versatile man-to-man DBs. On offense, the Lions' add more presnap shifting and motions, and clustered receivers stress defenses with crisscrossing release angles. First-round rookie tight end T.J. Hockenson plays the Rob Gronkowski role. Unfortunately, with receiving back Theo Riddick's release there is no one to be their James White, so the wide receivers—Marvin Jones, former Patriot Danny Amendola and even lanky star Kenny Golladay—play a bigger role, showing enough flexibility to align anywhere. The offense controls games through scheme.

× **HOCKENSON BOOSTS DETROIT'S LONG-SUFFERING GROUND GAME.** A noted run blocker at Iowa, the 6' 5", 247-pound **Hockenson →** fits the man-to-man blocking designs that best suit second-year tailback Kerryon Johnson. Detroit's ground game, which hasn't been right since Barry Sanders retired two decades ago, improves. Its otherwise stalwart line is weak at guard, which hinders the pull-blocking on staple power and counter runs. But at least those rushes help establish a more potent play-action game.

× **MATTHEW STAFFORD SHOWS HIS BONA FIDES.** Cast in a system predicated on presnap strategy under new offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell, Stafford builds on the maturity and discipline that he began to show in 2016. The strong-armed 11th-year pro is not Tom Brady, but he reminds people that he is a true franchise quarterback.

× **JARRAD DAVIS BECOMES A TOP FIVE LINEBACKER.** The ability of **Davis ↑** to diagnose a play can run hot and cold, but he compensates with scintillating explosiveness. His run defense gets a boost from the talent in front of him. The Lions signed end Trey Flowers (five years, $90 million) from New England, and they also feature tackles Da'Shawn Hand and Damon Harrison, whose midseason acquisition from the Giants last year made Detroit nearly impossible to run against.

× **THE THIRD-DOWN DEFENSE IMPROVES.** This happens not through blitzing (which the Lions do sparingly) but because of a strong array of man coverages from their deep, versatile secondary.

POSITION RANKINGS

Strength	QB 10	RB 20
	WR/TE 10	OL 22
	FRONT 7 13	DB 18

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
9-7
2018 RECORD 6-10

SEPT. 8	**@ ARI**
SEPT. 15	**vs. LAC**
SEPT. 22	**@ PHI**
SEPT. 29	**vs. KC**
OCT. 6	**BYE**
OCT. 14	**@ GB**
OCT. 20	**vs. MIN**
OCT. 27	**vs. NYG**
NOV. 3	**@ OAK**
NOV. 10	**@ CHI**
NOV. 17	**vs. DAL**
NOV. 24	**@ WAS**
NOV. 28	**vs. CHI**
DEC. 8	**@ MIN**
DEC. 15	**vs. TB**
DEC. 22	**vs. DEN**
DEC. 29	**vs. GB**

GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES (DAVIS); ALLAN DRANBERG/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

» *Bottom Line* Following New England's blueprint, the Lions have quietly built a team devoid of weaknesses (beyond questions at guard). This year they will win more of their close games.

CHICAGO BEARS

4

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
7–9
2018 RECORD 12–4

SEPT. 5	vs. GB
SEPT. 15	@ DEN
SEPT. 23	@ WAS
SEPT. 29	vs. MIN
OCT. 6	@ OAK
OCT. 13	BYE
OCT. 20	vs. NO
OCT. 27	vs. LAC
NOV. 3	@ PHI
NOV. 10	vs. DET
NOV. 17	@ LAR
NOV. 24	vs. NYG
NOV. 28	@ DET
DEC. 5	vs. DAL
DEC. 15	@ GB
DEC. 22	vs. KC
DEC. 29	@ MIN

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE NFL'S BEST DEFENSE OF 2018 TAKES A STEP BACK.** Coordinator Vic Fangio left this offseason to take the head job in Denver, and the Bears will feel the loss, especially in pass coverage. Fangio's scheme, built on befuddling matchup-zone coverages, was the soundest in football. Its presnap two-deep safety looks and complex rotations protected corners Kyle Fuller and Prince Amukamara and allowed them to play the ball aggressively. New coordinator Chuck Pagano is an accomplished defensive play-caller, but his system is built more on blitzing, which means using one deep safety and man coverage on the outside. This change exposes Chicago's secondary, which was already weakened this offseason when the erratic Ha-Ha Clinton-Dix and Buster Skrine replaced free agents Adrian Amos and Bryce Callahan at free safety and slot corner, respectively.

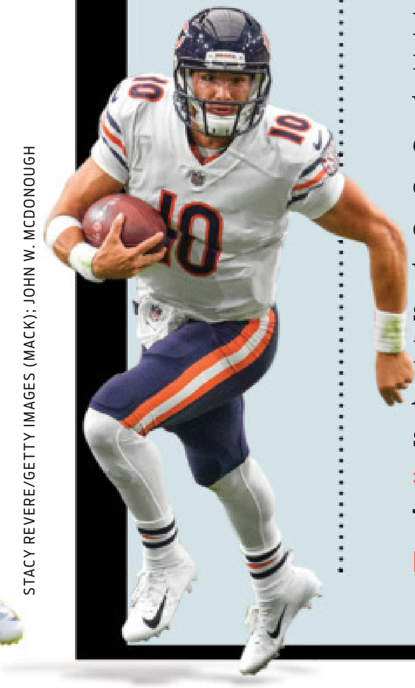
× **THE FRONT SEVEN MASKS SOME OF THE DEFENSE'S SLIDE.** Linebacker **Khalil Mack** ↑ and tackle Akiem Hicks are still superstars, and around them Chicago has dirty-work run defenders such as dexterous nosetackle Eddie Goldman and outside linebacker Leonard Floyd. Floyd is skinny (6' 4", 251 pounds) for his position but improved greatly at setting the edge in 2018. Electric second-year inside linebacker Roquan Smith, with his sensational playing speed, flourishes in Pagano's scheme.

× **COACH MATT NAGY'S OFFENSE EXPANDS IN HIS SECOND SEASON.** His system, built on presnap motion and postsnap misdirection, adds new dimensions with the continued development of third-year scatback Tarik Cohen, '18 second-round receiver Anthony Miller, versatile tight end Trey Burton, speed receiver Taylor Gabriel and the signing of gadget weapon Cordarrelle Patterson. The rhythm that Nagy's group has shown on scripted plays trickles into more of the nonscripted ones, and the Bears play with no-huddle tempo more often.

× **MITCHELL TRUBISKY DELIVERS MIXED RESULTS.** There's still a lot to like about the third-year QB, who is one of the top out-of-pocket throwers. But with a weakened D, the Bears need to score more. Nagy can no longer afford to protect **Trubisky** ← with basic route combinations. He will have to make more plays from the pocket, which he does, but his inconsistent footwork and decision making lead to more mistakes.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB	21
RB	22
WR/TE	22
OL	10
Strength FRONT 7	1
DB	17



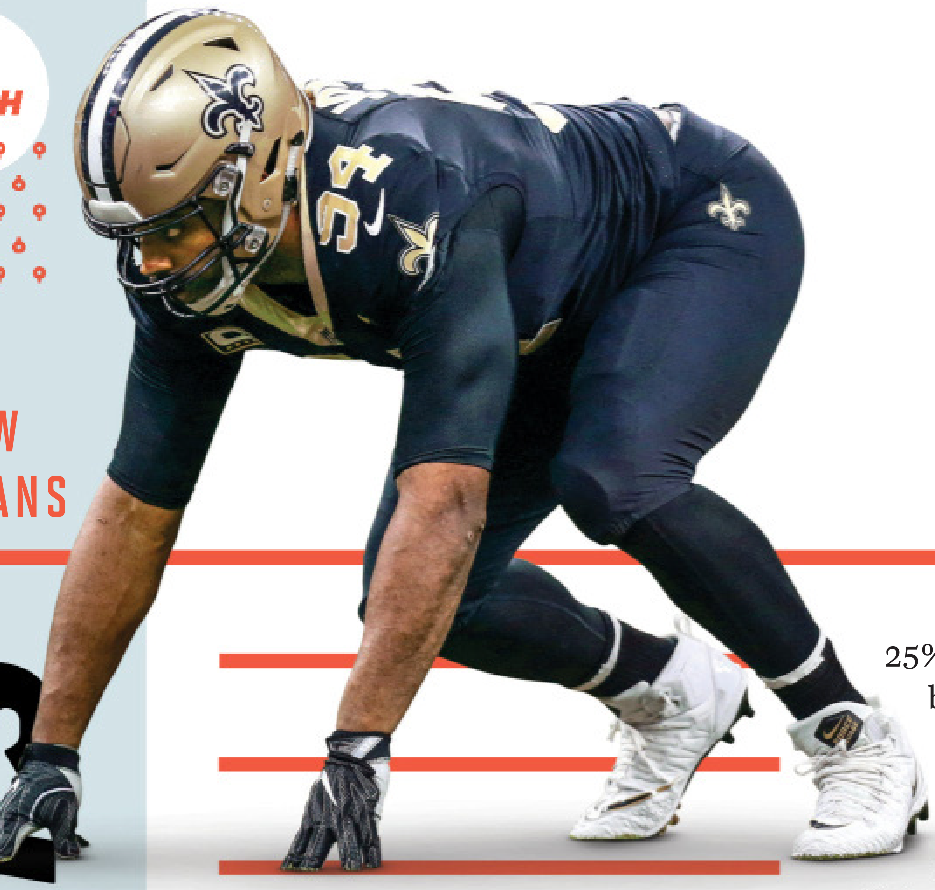
STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES (MACK); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

» Bottom Line The Bears are still better than they were before Nagy arrived last year, but the defensive slip and improvements by the NFC North's other teams result in a pre-Nagy-like record.

NFC
SOUTH

NEW ORLEANS

SAINTS



1

SI'S 2019 PREDICTION

11–5

2018 RECORD 13–3

SEPT. 9	vs. HOU
SEPT. 15	@ LAR
SEPT. 22	@ SEA
SEPT. 29	vs. DAL
OCT. 6	vs. TB
OCT. 13	@ JAX
OCT. 20	@ CHI
OCT. 27	vs. ARI
NOV. 3	BYE
NOV. 10	vs. ATL
NOV. 17	@ TB
NOV. 24	vs. CAR
NOV. 28	@ ATL
DEC. 8	vs. SF
DEC. 16	vs. IND
DEC. 22	@ TEN
DEC. 29	@ CAR

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE SAINTS' SUPPORTING CAST LIFTS THE OFFENSE.** The arm of 40-year-old Drew Brees continues its gradual decline, but he compensates with unparalleled pocket mechanics and field-reading acumen. It helps that New Orleans has perhaps the league's best O-line. Erik McCoy, a second-round rookie from Texas A&M, starts at center ahead of free-agent signee Nick Easton. Guards Andrus Peat and Larry Warford have the power to make the inside ground game go. Tackles Terron Armstead and Ryan Ramczyk can both pass-block on an island.

In 11-year veteran Jared Cook, the Saints have their first mismatch-making tight end since Jimmy Graham. Cook's ability to execute iso routes on the weak side expands the passing attack and eases the pressure on a wide receivers corps that, beyond ace Michael Thomas, is solid but unspectacular.

× **ALVIN KAMARA BECOMES AN MVP CANDIDATE.** The third-year star doesn't win the award because he plays about 25% fewer snaps than foundational backs like Christian McCaffrey, Saquon Barkley, Le'Veon Bell and Ezekiel Elliott, but people within the NFL rate **Kamara** ↓ as the most feared backfield weapon. His terrifying speed allows him to turn corners, while his balance helps him break tackles, including on inside runs, where he's surprisingly effective. And with soft hands, quick feet and sharp body control, he can run a full route tree, adding vastly to New Orleans's passing game, especially on the short side of the field, where Kamara often operates alongside Thomas.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 4	RB 6
WR/TE 9	OL 2 Strength
FRONT 7 14	DB 10

× **THE D-LINE PERFORMANCE IS CRITICAL.** The Saints' linebackers and defensive backs, though talented, are streaky. They need a strong four-man rush to camouflage this. The line, well-coached and on the rise, is keyed by brilliant, tireless nine-year veteran **Cam Jordan** ↑, and coordinator Dennis Allen keeps offenses guessing with an ever-changing array of easy-to-execute man and zone looks. In the previous 12 seasons under coach Sean Payton, New Orleans has made the playoffs only once without a top 14 scoring D, and that was in 2009, when it forced the second-most turnovers.

× **ALEX ANZALONE BREAKS OUT.** The third-year middle linebacker builds on his late-season surge of '18, injecting speed and aggression into the nickel package.

SEAN GARDNER/GETTY IMAGES (JORDAN); DAVID E. KLUTHO

» Bottom Line On paper, this team is better than the one that came so close to winning the NFC championship game. It is fair to expect them to go a step further.

NFC
SOUTH

2

ATLANTA
FALCONS

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
10–6
2018 RECORD 7–9

SEPT. 8	@ MIN
SEPT. 15	vs. PHI
SEPT. 22	@ IND
SEPT. 29	vs. TEN
OCT. 6	@ HOU
OCT. 13	@ ARI
OCT. 20	vs. LAR
OCT. 27	vs. SEA
NOV. 3	BYE
NOV. 10	@ NO
NOV. 17	@ CAR
NOV. 24	vs. TB
NOV. 28	vs. NO
DEC. 8	vs. CAR
DEC. 15	@ SF
DEC. 22	vs. JAX
DEC. 29	@ TB

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **MATT RYAN'S ARM STRENGTH STAYS AN ISSUE.** The decline began to show last season, as several of Ryan's downfield passes lost zip late in flight. This doesn't mean the 34-year-old won't excel. Ryan is a master executor who understands the intent and nuances of a play's design.

× **CALVIN RIDLEY TOPS 1,000 YARDS.** Atlanta's 2018 first-round pick benefits from playing opposite Julio Jones, the game's best all-around wideout, but **Ridley** ↑ is a top-shelf weapon on himself. He has great vertical speed and quickness, and is deft at throttling down, a trait shared by elite separators such as Antonio Brown, Odell Beckham Jr. and Brandin Cooks.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB	RB	WR/TE	OL	FRONT 7	DB
9	18	1	11	22	15
		Strength			

× **ROOKIE LINEMEN BOOST THE GROUND GAME.** The Falcons spent their two first-round picks this spring on right guard Chris Lindstrom (Boston College) and right tackle Kaleb McGary (Washington) in an attempt to rectify the offense's greatest weakness. Add these rookies to athletic left tackle Jake Matthews and center Alex Mack, who may be starting to decline at 33 but is still quick and savvy, and Atlanta succeeds with its outside-zone ground game, which suits a quick, decisive runner such as Devonta Freeman.

× **TAKK MCKINLEY BECOMES THE DEFENSE'S MOST IMPORTANT PLAYER.** Last year injuries to linebacker Deion Jones (foot) and safeties Keanu Neal (knee) and Ricardo Allen (Achilles) exposed a long-inconsistent four-man rush. That rush remains critical this year given the many questions facing the secondary: How effective will the starting safeties be after their injuries? Can 2018 second-rounder Isaiah Oliver hold up as a No. 2 corner? Who handles the slot duties—converted up-and-down safety Damontae Kazee or speedy fourth-round rookie Kendall Sheffield? The Falcons really need the pass rush to deliver, and while they have explosive tackle Grady Jarrett and swift end Vic Beasley, **McKinley** ←, a 6' 2", 265-pound end with speed and power, must be outstanding.

× **THE DEFENSIVE SCHEME KEEPS EXPANDING.** After incorporating more man coverage into his Seahawks-style Cover 3 zone over the past few years, coach Dan Quinn adds more fire-zone blitzes, which provide a fifth rusher while also creating matchup coverage scenarios downfield. It is an effective counter to the Cover 3–beating play designs in which offenses are growing proficient.

DAVID E. KLUTHO (RIDLEY); CLIFF WELCH/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

» **Bottom Line** With a fortified line and a still-sharp Ryan, the Falcons could have a top five offense—and they will need one to compensate for a defense riddled with question marks.

NFC
SOUTH

CAROLINA

PANTHERS

3

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE PASSING GAME REMAINS INCONSISTENT.** Cam Newton is an up-and-down thrower when fully healthy, and this year he is coming off surgery on his right (throwing) shoulder. His strong arm and toughness in the pocket are offset by erratic mechanics and streaky field vision. That's especially problematic because 34-year-old tight end Greg Olsen, who has missed 16 games over the last two seasons with foot injuries, is Newton's only regular target taller than 6' 1".

× **CHRISTIAN MCCAFFREY TOPS 2,000 TOTAL YARDS.** Patience, balance and vision make the third-year back perfect for Carolina's ground game, which features misdirection, multiple moving pieces and Newton, the best down-to-down running QB ever. The offense begins here, with 30-plus rushes a week and a play-action passing game aimed at taking deep shots. Those downfield looks also serve to set up **McCaffrey →**, who makes nearly 90% of his catches out of the backfield. After the catch he is superb at turning downhill.

× **A DEFENSIVE "SWITCH" EQUALS MORE OF THE SAME.** Much has been made about the Panthers' defense, which has been a traditional 4–3, starting to use more 3–4 looks, but that's all these are: looks. What matters more is how they defend run gaps after the snap. They continue playing their usual one-gap, attack-oriented 4–3 principles, built around penetrating tackles Kawann Short and Gerald McCoy, and edge men Mario Addison, Bruce Irvin and first-round rookie Brian Burns. Then there's **Luke Kuechly ↑**, whose remarkable speed and play recognition make him football's best linebacker by a clear margin. Carolina joins the growing group of classic 4–3 defenses that now align in a 3–4 structure simply to prevent blockers from double-teaming defensive linemen.

× **SECOND-YEAR DEFENSIVE BACKS ARE CAROLINA'S BELLWETHER.** Cornerback Donte Jackson, a 2018 second-round pick, ran hot and cold as a rookie, flashing top-level athleticism but losing on far too many vertical routes. Third-round safety Rashaan Gaulden never captured a starting job last year even as veteran Mike Adams became a liability. The hope is that Gaulden can beat out a host of middling veterans to start opposite Eric Reid. The chemistry and awareness of these young players determines how the zone-oriented defense performs.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 17	RB 11
WR/TE 24	OL 18
FRONT 7 7	DB 27 Weakness

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
7–9
2018 RECORD 7–9

SEPT. 8	vs. LAR
SEPT. 12	vs. TB
SEPT. 22	@ ARI
SEPT. 29	@ HOU
OCT. 6	vs. JAX
OCT. 13 (in London)	@ TB
OCT. 20	BYE
OCT. 27	@ SF
NOV. 3	vs. TEN
NOV. 10	@ GB
NOV. 17	vs. ATL
NOV. 24	@ NO
DEC. 1	vs. WAS
DEC. 8	@ ATL
DEC. 15	vs. SEA
DEC. 22	@ IND
DEC. 29	vs. NO

ROB TRINGALI (2)

» Bottom Line With a weak passing game Carolina, which missed out on the playoffs in 2018 for just the second time in six years, comes up short again.

THIS IS NOT A BED™

It's proven quality sleep.

Designed to keep you and your partner effortlessly comfortable, the Sleep Number 360® smart bed senses your movements then automatically adjusts. You can actually feel it contour to your head, neck, shoulders, back and hips, relieving pressure points.

i8
J.D. POWER AND ASSOCIATES
HIGHEST CUSTOMER SATISFACTION
MATTRESSES • 2018
PRESENTED TO
SLEEP NUMBER
BY J.D. POWER AND ASSOCIATES

RANKED #1

IN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WITH MATTRESSES

#1 IN VALUE | #1 IN COMFORT | #1 IN SUPPORT | #1 IN FEATURES | #1 IN WARRANTY

For J.D. Power 2018 award information, visit jdpower.com/awards

83 SleepIQ® Score

25 YEAR

AUTOMATICALLY RESPONDS TO YOU

ADJUSTABLE COMFORT ON EACH SIDE

CONTOURS TO YOU FOR MORE PROPER SPINAL ALIGNMENT*

SHOWS HOW WELL YOU'RE SLEEPING

25-YEAR LIMITED WARRANTY†

100-NIGHT TRIAL‡

sleep number.

REQUEST A CATALOG | 1-877-746-7952 | sleepnumber.com/sports

Upholstered furniture, adjustable base and pillows available at additional cost. Prices higher in AK and HI. *For a summary of clinical studies, visit sleepnumber.com. †2-Year Limited Warranty on SleepIQ® technology. Warranties available at sleepnumber.com. ‡Restrictions and exclusions apply. Does not apply to adjustable bases, Upholstered Collection, closeout/clearance or demo/floor model purchases or mattresses already exchanged under another In-Home Trial period. You pay return shipping. Refunds will be made to the original method of payment less original shipping/delivery fees. Visit sleepnumber.com for complete details. SLEEP NUMBER, SLEEPIQ, SLEEP NUMBER 360, the Double Arrow Design, and SELECT COMFORT are registered trademarks of Sleep Number Corporation. ©2019 Sleep Number Corporation

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

4

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **BRUCE ARIANS STRUGGLES TO SALVAGE JAMEIS WINSTON.** **Winston ↑** can read coverages and play from within the pocket—two vital traits for an NFL quarterback. But the No. 1 pick of the 2015 draft remains inconsistent in his mechanics and especially his decision making. Winston can be excellent targeting deep-intermediate routes, but he too often throws late across the middle, which is a great way to be intercepted. Arians, who can be notoriously blunt, emphasizes to Winston the virtue of safer throws. The problem is that Arians's scheme is heavy on downfield route combinations, often with five receivers out in patterns; for his offense to thrive, the quarterback must be willing to reach for the opportunities created. Arians's greatest successes have been with Ben Roethlisberger, Andrew Luck and Carson Palmer—three aggressive downfield throwers. Winston could be a fourth, if so much of him didn't need to be reprogrammed.

× **THE GROUND GAME REMAINS HOT AND COLD.** Stylistically, Tampa Bay's road-grading O-line fits Arians's inside zone scheme, as does nimble **Peyton Barber ↓**, who might be football's most underrated tailback. But it's hard to expect too much from the rushing attack; last year, with the same players and the same inside-zone scheme, the Buccaneers ranked 31st in yards per attempt.

× **YOUNG DEFENSIVE BACKS PLAY A KEY ROLE.** Carlton Davis, Tampa Bay's 2018 second-round cornerback, struggled early as a rookie but improved down the stretch. At 6' 1", he has the length to handle press coverage, which happens to be the specialty of '19 second-rounder Sean Bunting from Central Michigan, one of three DBs taken with the team's first four draft picks. These backs can jam receivers, giving the signature blitzes of new coordinator Todd Bowles time to get home.

× **OPPOSING GUARDS AND CENTERS HATE PLAYING THE BUCS.** Bowles's blitzes often attack the interior of the offensive line. With speedy linebackers—No. 5 pick Devin White of LSU, veteran Lavonte David and former Cardinal Deone Bucannon—and no proven edge rushers, Bowles relies on his preferred inside pressures. That also happens to be a good way to attack the pocket-oriented passers of the NFC South: Cam Newton, Matt Ryan and especially Drew Brees.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB	24	
RB	23	
WR/TE	8	
OL	15	
FRONT 7	30	
DB	32	Weakness

SI'S 2019 PREDICTION
5–11
2018 RECORD 5–11

SEPT. 8	vs. SF
SEPT. 12	@ CAR
SEPT. 22	vs. NYG
SEPT. 29	@ LAR
OCT. 6	@ NO
OCT. 13 (in London)	vs. CAR
OCT. 20	BYE
OCT. 27	@ TEN
NOV. 3	@ SEA
NOV. 10	vs. ARI
NOV. 17	vs. NO
NOV. 24	@ ATL
DEC. 1	@ JAX
DEC. 8	vs. IND
DEC. 15	@ DET
DEC. 22	vs. HOU
DEC. 29	vs. ATL

LAURA HEALD (WINSTON); MIKE EHRMANN/GETTY IMAGES

» ***Bottom Line*** History says a risk-taking QB like Winston won't change (especially when his scheme remains similar). That, plus an overhaul on defense, means that a turnaround is at least a year away.

WHAT MAKES A LEGEND?

Jerry Rice #80

Nickname "World"

Legendary Receiver

20	20 NFL Seasons
22,895	22,895 Career Yards Receiving
208	208 Touchdowns – the Most in NFL History
274	274 Consecutive Games with at least One Catch
36	36 NFL Records
1	1 Super Bowl XXIII MVP (11 Catches, 215 Yards, 1 TD)
3	3 Super Bowl Championships
2	2 Halls of Fame – Pro Football Hall of Fame and College Football Hall of Fame

COPPER fit®

LIVE LIMITLESS

LEGENDARY SLEEVES

THE ORIGINAL
COPPER fit
FREEDOM
COPPER INFUSED
COMPRESSION SLEEVES
ELBOW SLEEVE
KNEE SLEEVE
NEW CONTOUR DESIGN
PERFECT FIT GUARANTEED
1 KNEE SLEEVE

SOCKS

COPPER fit
ENERGY
COMPRESSION SOCKS
NEW
EASY ON
EASY OFF
TECHNOLOGY
COPPER INFUSED
ANTI-ODOR
GRADUATED COMPRESSION
INCREASES CIRCULATION

AND GLOVES

COPPER fit
COPPER INFUSED
COMPRESSION GLOVES
HAND RELIEF
ALL DAY RELIEF FOR:
ARTHRITIS PAIN
&
JOINT SWELLING
Includes: 1 PAIR

Available at
CVS, Rite Aid, Walgreens,
and Walmart

NFC
WEST

LOS ANGELES

RAMS

1

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× THE GROUND GAME EXPANDS. **Todd Gurley ↑** is still a quality runner at 25, but to combat wear and tear on his much-discussed-arthritic left knee, the Rams give some of his touches to third-round rookie Darrell Henderson. The Memphis product brings more dimension to the screen and misdirection games—and L.A.'s updated scheme, in turn, makes use of that. Coach Sean McVay remains committed to his outside zone foundation, which not only works in and of itself but also sets up the team's lethal play-action game, in which QB Jared Goff is at his best. However, as the Bears and the Patriots demonstrated to the league last season, this approach can be countered with heavy, condensed defensive fronts, so McVay responds by adding wrinkles that lend more unpredictability to his rushing attack. The only question is whether the well-coached but suddenly youthful interior O-line, which lost left guard Rodger Saffold and center John Sullivan, can keep up. Second-year pros Joseph Noteboom and Brian Allen are new starters, and fourth-year right guard Austin Blythe, though on the rise, remains a work in progress.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 13	RB 4
Strength WR/TE 4	OL 7
FRONT 7 24	DBs 5

× ROBERT WOODS SWIMS IN PRAISE. Brandin Cooks is the Rams' most dangerous receiver, but Woods is their best. His route-running is pristine, and his blocking, along with Cooper Kupp's, is vital to the ground game.

× ERIC WEDDLE MEANS A LOT. The savvy of 13-year safety Weddle, signed as a free agent, allows the Rams to add new layers of disguised coverage that naturally build on the hybrid man-zone concepts of coordinator Wade Phillips. The updated defense has more of a "matchup" feel, but this doesn't become a pure man-to-man, in part because right corner Marcus Peters is much better in zone concepts.

× AARON DONALD DOMINATES AGAIN. It's unfair to suggest that any player will have 20 sacks. But with the scheme expanding to include more diverse fronts and designer pass-rush tactics, **Donald →**, who led the NFL with 20½ sacks last year, makes another run at Defensive Player of the Year.

× JOHN JOHNSON BREAKS OUT. The third-year safety can effectively provide run support and, more important, cover tight ends in man or zone. In fact, one of the many battles he won last season was against Rob Gronkowski in Super Bowl LIII.

SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
12–4
2018 RECORD 13–3

SEPT. 8
@ CAR
SEPT. 15
vs. NO
SEPT. 22
@ CLE
SEPT. 29
vs. TB
OCT. 3
@ SEA
OCT. 13
vs. SF
OCT. 20
@ ATL
OCT. 27
[in London]
vs. CIN
NOV. 3
BYE
NOV. 10
@ PIT
NOV. 17
vs. CHI
NOV. 25
vs. BAL
DEC. 1
@ ARI
DEC. 8
vs. SEA
DEC. 15
@ DAL
DEC. 22
[Flex]
@ SF
DEC. 29
vs. ARI

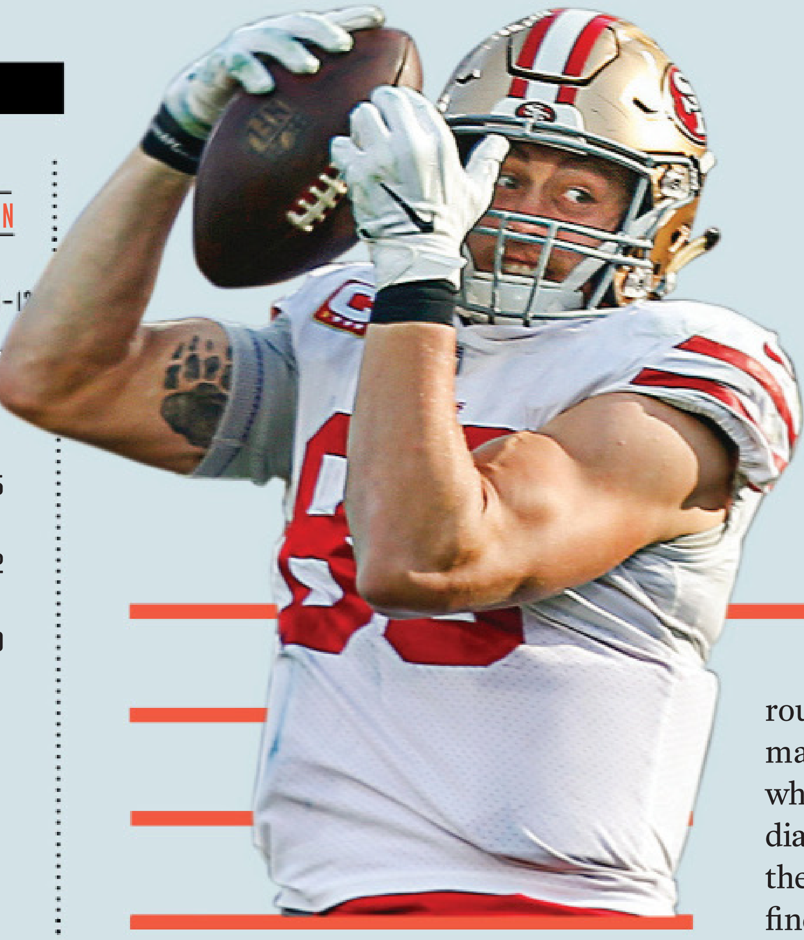
KOHJIRO KINNO (GURLEY); JOHN MCCOY/GETTY IMAGES

» Bottom Line The Rams' offense is every bit as potent as it was a year ago, but defenses are more familiar with their tactics. L.A.'s success hinges on its ability to evolve.

NFC
WEST

2

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS



SI'S 2019
PREDICTION
10–6
2018 RECORD 4-1

SEPT. 8	@ TB
SEPT. 15	@ CIN
SEPT. 22	vs. PIT
SEPT. 29	BYE
OCT. 7	vs. CLE
OCT. 13	@ LAR
OCT. 20	@ WAS
OCT. 27	vs. CAR
OCT. 31	@ ARI
NOV. 11	vs. SEA
NOV. 17	vs. ARI
NOV. 24	vs. GB
DEC. 1	@ BAL
DEC. 8	@ NO
DEC. 15	vs. ATL
DEC. 22 [Flex]	vs. LAR
DEC. 29	@ SEA

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE OFFENSE SIZZLES.** Few teams have personnel that fit their scheme better, starting with QB Jimmy Garoppolo, who has the twitchy release to make every inside throw. His reads are mostly defined because coach Kyle Shanahan's system is predicated heavily on building passes off the threat of the run, and this goes well beyond San Francisco's fantastic outside-zone play-action. Shanahan plays with two backs more than any schemer, by a wide margin, which is why his team in each of the last three years has signed a pricey free-agent back: Kyle Juszczyk, Jerick McKinnon and, this year, Tevin Coleman. With two backs in, the Niners compel defenses to prepare for more run possibilities, which limits their options in coverages. Shanahan exploits the suddenly predictable coverages through route combinations or mismatch-making formation wrinkles.

× **GEORGE KITTLE KEEPS IT UP.** He may not top his tight-end-record 1,377 yards from last year, but **Kittle** ↑, the 2017 fifth-round pick, again stars in a system that makes great use of "flood" concepts, in which three routes—one deep, one intermediate and one short—attack the same side of the field. On such plays the ball very often finds the intermediate receiver: Kittle.

× **THE PASS DEFENSE SOLIDIFIES.** That is, as long as ends Nick Bosa (a first-round pick from Ohio State) and ex-Chief Dee Ford are healthy. (Both had notable injuries in training camp.) The 49ers invested in Bosa and Ford because their scheme's Cover 3 foundation requires pressure up front to work. Last year they generated barely any, especially off the edges. The team was also plagued by injuries in the secondary, surrendering 35 touchdown passes, second-most in the league, and forced just seven turnovers, four fewer than the NFL's previous all-time low. Flanking tackle **DeForest Buckner** ← with premium edge rushers has a multplier effect, covering for a still-flawed (though improving) secondary. If the 49ers can apply pressure, their defense will be in the top 10.

× **THE RUN D ALSO COMES ALONG.** Stacked behind the talented D-line is a stalwart linebacker tandem: sensational but unheralded 2018 third-rounder Fred Warner, who plays with the poise of a 10-year veteran, and productive former Buccaneer Kwon Alexander, who also boosts the nickel coverage.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 15	RB 7
WR-TE 18	OL 17
FRONT 7 10	DB 31 Weakness

MICHAEL ZAGARIS/SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS/GETTY IMAGES (KITTLE); STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES

» *Bottom Line* The Niners would have broken out in 2018 if not for injuries. With better health—and there are already concerns on the D-line—they're primed for a playoff run.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

3

SI'S 2019 PREDICTION
7–9
2018 RECORD 10–6

SEPT. 8	vs. CIN
SEPT. 15	@ PIT
SEPT. 22	vs. NO
SEPT. 29	@ ARI
OCT. 3	vs. LAR
OCT. 13	@ CLE
OCT. 20	vs. BAL
OCT. 27	@ ATL
NOV. 3	vs. TB
NOV. 11	@ SF
NOV. 17	BYE
NOV. 24	@ PHI
DEC. 2	vs. MIN
DEC. 8	@ LAR
DEC. 15	@ CAR
DEC. 22	vs. ARI
DEC. 29	vs. SF

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **THE OFFENSE REMAINS RUN-FIRST.** There's zero question that **Russell Wilson** ↑ is best suited to this type of attack. The Seahawks rode running back Marshawn Lynch from 2010 to '15, then were up and down for much of the two years after his retirement, when Wilson was the centerpiece. Last year, after an 0–2 start, coach Pete Carroll and new coordinator Brian Schottenheimer pivoted back to a run-first approach, and the team won 10 of 14 games to make the playoffs. Seattle builds on that in '19. Newly signed left guard Mike Iupati is unreliable but has the mauling profile this team desires. Playing a sixth offensive lineman—usually tackle George Fant—on 20% of the snaps creates additional run gaps and variables in their north-and-south ground game. Being run-heavy also sets up Wilson's superb downfield and out-of-pocket passing, especially on play-action, while curbing his captivating but often rhythm-killing tendency to break down plays unnecessarily.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 11	RB 14
WR/TE 26	OL 16
Weakness FRONT 7 27	DB 26

× **THE RECEIVING CORPS SURVIVES THE LOSS OF DOUG BALDWIN.** The recently retired Baldwin brought crucial slot craftiness to Seattle's old scheme but was not as vital to the new one, which, as with many run-based offenses, features vertical routes. Second-round rookie receiver D.K. Metcalf (Ole Miss) is nowhere near the player Baldwin was, but he brings a perimeter downfield threat that has been lacking, and he allows **Tyler Lockett** → to handle more of the slot duties.

× **POOR D-LINE PLAY HURTS THE DEFENSE.** Seattle no longer runs a pure Cover 3 scheme, as Carroll and defensive coordinator Ken Norton continue to incorporate two-deep zone and match zone, as well as one-deep man coverage. But they still need a potent four-man rush. With top defensive lineman Jarran Reed suspended six games for a domestic violence incident, Frank Clark departed to Kansas City and first-round rookie L.J. Collier (from TCU) missing training camp with a right ankle sprain, the Seahawks simply have no pass-rushing juice, especially early in the season. Quality linebacker play, plus the emergence of nimble nose-shade tackle Poona Ford, gives Seattle a strong run D, but the line still needs to make noise on third down. To generate pressure, Seattle must blitz, which often means forcing top coverage linebacker Bobby Wagner to rush.

JAMIE SCHWABEROW (2)

» ***Bottom Line*** The Seahawks will succeed with their run-heavy offense only if they have a rock-solid defense to complement it. This D lacks the depth and front-line effectiveness to be great.

4

ARIZONA
CARDINALS

SI'S 2
PREDIC
5-11
2018 RECORD 3-13

SEPT. 8	vs. DET
SEPT. 15	@ BAL
SEPT. 22	vs. CAR
SEPT. 29	vs. SEA
OCT. 6	@ CIN
OCT. 13	vs. ATL
OCT. 20	@ NYG
OCT. 27	@ NO
OCT. 31	vs. SF
NOV. 10	@ TB
NOV. 17	@ SF
NOV. 24	BYE
DEC. 1	vs. LAR
DEC. 8	vs. PIT
DEC. 15	vs. CLE
DEC. 22	@ SEA
DEC. 29	@ LAR

WHAT LIES AHEAD

× **KYLER MURRAY AND KLIFF KINGSBURY ELECTRIFY OUT OF THE GATE.** Kingsbury, the former Texas Tech coach, has the advantage of being a largely unknown NFL schemer, and the Cards capitalize early, running a diverse, modern passing game. This plays to the strengths of **Murray ↑**. With physical traits similar to, but more dynamic than, Russell Wilson's, the No. 1 pick from Oklahoma can dice opponents by playing both on schedule and off script. His highs are offset by lows, however, as he learns on the fly about how to be an NFL quarterback. The biggest key for Murray, as with any young mobile QB, is learning when it is appropriate to rely on his legs.

× **SEEDS OF A FOUR-RECEIVER REVOLUTION ARE PLANTED.** The Cardinals are not rich at wideout, but with two stylistically contrasting slot weapons—the ageless **Larry Fitzgerald ←** and second-round rookie jitterbug Andy Isabella from UMass—they stress defenses inside with the four-receiver sets Kingsbury favors. Plus, when split out, tailback David Johnson is potent as a pass catcher, giving Arizona the rare five-receiver package in which every snap will produce at least one mismatch.

× **A 36-YEAR-OLD LIFTS THE FRONT SEVEN.** On paper, Terrell Suggs has for years fit the profile of a player about to wash up, but the former Raven continues to play with domineering strength, leverage, technique and awareness. Opposite Chandler Jones, Suggs elevates the pass rush and solves many of the edge problems that plagued this run D in 2018. With the line set, '17 first-rounder Haason Reddick settles into the stack linebacker position that he filled with increasing aplomb last season.

× **QUESTIONS OVERWHELM THE SECONDARY.** Can the Cardinals, who lack depth at corner, survive superstar Patrick Peterson's six-game suspension for a PED violation? With projected starter Robert Alford out with a broken leg, can rookie Byron Murphy stabilize the perennially wobbly No. 2 corner spot? Murphy primarily played off coverage at Washington. What happens when new coordinator Vance Joseph's multifaceted scheme calls for man-to-man? Can the Cardinals find someone to consistently play the slot? They need to so that last year's slot man, the springy Budda Baker, can move to centerfield, where he can cover as much ground as any free safety. With all these issues, excellence proves hard to come by.

POSITION RANKINGS

QB 29 Weakness	RB 12
WR/TE 23	OL 24
FRONT 7 15	DB 21

RALPH FRESO/GETTY IMAGES (MURRAY); JOHN MCDONOUGH

» ***Bottom Line*** The Cards are much better than in 2018 and will pull off a few upsets. But sustained success is unlikely with a rookie coach and QB, and with all the gaps they have in the defensive backfield.

100

ON THE OCCASION OF THE *NFL'S 100TH SEASON*, YOU CAN TELL THE STORY OF THE LEAGUE THROUGH THE WORK OF 100 ESSENTIAL FIGURES . . .

For more on SI's list of the 100 people who shaped the NFL, visit TheMMQB.com

LYLE ALZADO Raiders wild man copped to PED use and blamed it for the brain cancer that killed him **DR. JAMES ANDREWS** Orthopedist revolutionized joint surgery, saving countless football careers **ROONE ARLEDGE** Creator of *Monday Night Football* **SAMMY BAUGH** Biggest star of the '40s **ODELL BECKHAM JR.** Quintessential player of the social media age **CHUCK BEDNARIK** Last of the great two-way'ers; central in the NFL's most famous photo **BILL BELICHICK** Mastermind of a two-decade New England dynasty **BERT BELL** Postwar commish helped pull the league from obscurity **CHRIS BERMAN** Face of ESPN's coverage during the cable net's dominant years **MEL BLOUNT** Big, physical corner essentially forced rule changes that opened up the passing game **TOM BRADY** Six-time Super Bowl–winning Pats passer **JIM BROWN** Dominant '60s running back and prominent activist; retired in his prime for Hollywood **PAUL BROWN** Dominant, innovative Browns coach; later founded the Bengals **EARL CAMPBELL** Transcendent power runner whose curtailed career highlighted the game's physical toll **LEE CLOW** Creative mind behind Apple's revolutionary "1984" ad during SB XVIII **DON CORYELL** Passing-game genius forced defenses to adapt in football's constant strategic chess match **HOWARD COSELL** First celebrity sports broadcaster brought brash, caustic intellect to *MNF* **AL DAVIS** Iconoclastic Raiders coach-owner challenged league orthodoxy on myriad fronts **EDDIE DEBARTOLO JR.** 49ers owner's player-friendly approach laid the foundation for five Super Bowl wins **MIKE DITKA** First great pass-catching tight end; later coached the Bears to massive mainstream fame **JUDGE DAVID DOTY** Jurist opened the door to free agency, oversaw labor relations for three decades **TONY DUNGY** First black Super Bowl–winning coach; extensive, influential coaching tree **JOHN ELWAY** Generational talent forced draft trade to Denver; first to win the Super Bowl as a QB and GM **BRETT FAVRE** Most durable QB ever; tumultuous life story captivated America **PETER GENT** Receiver parlayed brief career into novel-film *North Dallas Forty*, the *Ball Four* of the NFL **FRANK GIFFORD** Clean-living Giants back missed a season after Bednarik's knockout; later anchored *MNF* **SID GILLMAN** Coaching pioneer of the modern passing game **PETE GOGOLAK** First to employ today's soccer-style kick **ROGER GOODELL** Commissioner during the NFL's most tumultuous decade **OTTO GRAHAM** Seven-time champion (AAFL, NFL) as Browns QB **RED GRANGE** College star of the '20s boosted the profile of the then lesser pro game **"MEAN" JOE GREENE** Anchor of Pittsburgh's Steel Curtain D; star of a memorable Coke commercial **GEORGE HALAS** League founder; owner, coach and patriarch of the Bears **SCOTT HANSON & ANDREW SICILIANO** Hosts of transformative, rival Red Zone broadcasts **BOB HAYES** Olympic 100-meter champ-turned-HOF Cowboys receiver **ROY HOFHEINZ** Driving force behind the Astrodome, the first indoor football stadium **PAUL HORNUNG** Packers golden boy; suspended all of '63—two years after he won MVP—for gambling **LAMAR HUNT** Founder of the AFL, patriarch of the Chiefs and smoother of AFL-NFL discord **DON HUTSON** Record-setting Packers receiver was decades ahead of his time **MICHAEL JACKSON** Pop superstar helped turn Super Bowl halftime into a TV event in its own right **BILLY (WHITE SHOES) JOHNSON** Colorful returnman's TD celebrations set off a phenomenon **JERRY JONES** Cowboys owner's power grew with new revenue streams he created and pushed **WILFORD (CRAZY RAY) JONES** Staple of Dallas sidelines (and broadcasts), heralding the rise of superfan culture **COLIN KAEPERNICK** 49ers QB's protests of racial injustice shook the NFL and generated volatile public debate **CHIP KELLY** College innovator failed in the NFL but proved the feasibility of wide-open spread concepts in the pros **MEL KIPER JR.** Self-made expert kick-started the mainstream draft information craze **CURLY LAMBEAU** Packers patriarch's leadership allowed the NFL to survive in tiny Green Bay **TOM LANDRY** Iconic, fedora-topped Cowboys coach racked up 270 wins, fourth-most all time **DICK (NIGHT TRAIN) LANE** Fearsome '50s DB and one of the first great black players **RAY LEWIS** Intense, voluble Ravens LB notoriously caught up in the killings at SB XXXIV in Atlanta **VINCE LOMBARDI** Packers icon and, for many, the idealized image of a football coach **JOHN MADDEN** HOF coach-turned-broadcaster, known to later generations for his eponymous video game **TONY MANDARICH** From Incredible Bulk to Incredible Bust, the embodiment of steroid use **PEYTON MANNING** Five-time MVP and the face of the league in the '00s **GEORGE PRESTON MARSHALL** Last owner to integrate his team, the Redskins—and only under pressure from the feds **WILL MCDONOUGH** The first prominent national notes/info reporter, he paved the way for info-driven media coverage **JOE MONTANA** Four-time Super Bowl–winning QB **WARREN MOON** Best NFL player to come out of the CFL, after likely being blackballed by the NFL for being African-American **ANTHONY MUÑOZ** Arguably the greatest O-lineman—and greatest Latino player—ever **RUPERT MURDOCH** Fox impresario's network broadcasts reshaped the league's branding **BRONKO NAGURSKI** Legendary tough guy of the rough-and-tumble '30s **JOE NAMATH** Fabled '60s playboy glamorized the QB position **OZZIE NEWSOME** HOF tight end, first black GM and architect of powerhouse Ravens teams **LISA OLSON** Pioneering journalist's mistreatment in the Patriots' locker room changed how the game is covered **BENNET OMALU** Pittsburgh coroner first identified CTE in former NFL players **BILL PARCELLS** HOF coach with an extensive tree, especially on the defensive side **WALTER PAYTON** Beloved Bears back after whom the NFL's humanitarian award is named **MIKE PEREIRA** Former zebra and officiating czar brought rules analysis to NFL broadcasts **FRITZ POLLARD** Coach for the first NFL champs was the best of the black players in the '20s, before the racial barrier **JERRY RICE** GOAT receiver **RAY RICE** Productive runner whose domestic-violence case exposed NFL's failures on social issues **ART ROONEY** Steelers patriarch waited four decades for his team to become champions, in the '70s **PETE ROZELLE** Oversaw the NFL-AFL merger, creating a cultural juggernaut **JAMARCUS RUSSELL** Colossal draft bust was a driving force in the institution of a rookie wage scale **ED & STEVE SABOL** Creative minds behind NFL Films shaped the public perception of the league **DEION SANDERS** Flamboyant two-sport star made the cornerback position sexy **JUNIOR SEAU** Hard-hitting product of the Polynesian pipeline; his possibly-CTE-linked suicide rocked sports **RICHARD SHERMAN** Outspoken corner gave voice to players' concerns in the '10s **DON SHULA** Dynastic Dolphins boss coached both Johnny Unitas and Dan Marino **O.J. SIMPSON** Record-setting RB with the strangest life story of any prominent American athlete **EMMITT SMITH** All-time leading rusher and the most accomplished of the Cowboys' Super Bowl–champion "triplets" **JIMMY (THE GREEK) SNYDER** Vegas bookie brought gambling info to CBS's pregame show; fired for racially ignorant comments **KEN STABLER** Hard-living southpaw QB and personification of the swashbuckling Raiders **LEIGH STEINBERG** Original superagent **DARRYL STINGLEY** Patriots receiver paralyzed for life by a Jack Tatum hit **LAWRENCE TAYLOR** Greatest defensive player ever? Career marred by alcohol, cocaine abuse **SARAH THOMAS** First female full-time official **JIM THORPE** Baseball star and Olympic decathlon champ played for six NFL teams **AMY TRASK** Highest-ranking woman ever in an NFL front office **JOHNNY UNITAS** Greatest QB of his—or maybe *any*—era **MICHAEL VICK** Electric scrambling QB, suspended and jailed for dogfighting at the height of his career **HERSCHEL WALKER** Biggest collegian to join the NFL-rival USFL; centerpiece of a massive trade at the heart of a Cowboys dynasty **BILL WALSH** Dynastic Niners coach brought West Coast offense to prominence **MIKE WEBSTER** First face of CTE and dementia in former players **BYRON (WHIZZER) WHITE** League-leading rusher personified NFL's slapdash nature in the '40s; left for a law career; **REGGIE WHITE** HOF defensive end and the first major unrestricted free agent **DOUG WILLIAMS** First black QB to win the Super Bowl **RICKY WILLIAMS** Enigmatic back brought mental-health issues and marijuana use into the open **WILFRED WINKENBACH** Inventor of fantasy football **JOHN WOOTEN** Longtime head of the Fritz Pollard Alliance, promoting diversity in coaching and front offices

. . . OR YOU CAN TELL THE STORY OF THE LEAGUE THROUGH

ONE REBELLIOUS, UNPARALLELED INNOVATOR

BY **L. JON WERTHEIM**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
RICHARD MACKSON

Raiders

AL, CAPITAN

For his first act as a head coach, in '63, all Davis did was change the Raiders' colors and logo, and reinvent the 1–13 losers as 10–4 contenders.

ROBERT KLEIN/AP

It had been a hell of a run for Matt Millen. The pugnacious linebacker played nine seasons for the Raiders, winning two Super Bowls, and he'd just been selected to the Pro Bowl. But here he was in 1989, in his early 30s, and he couldn't agree on a contract with team owner

AL DAVIS,

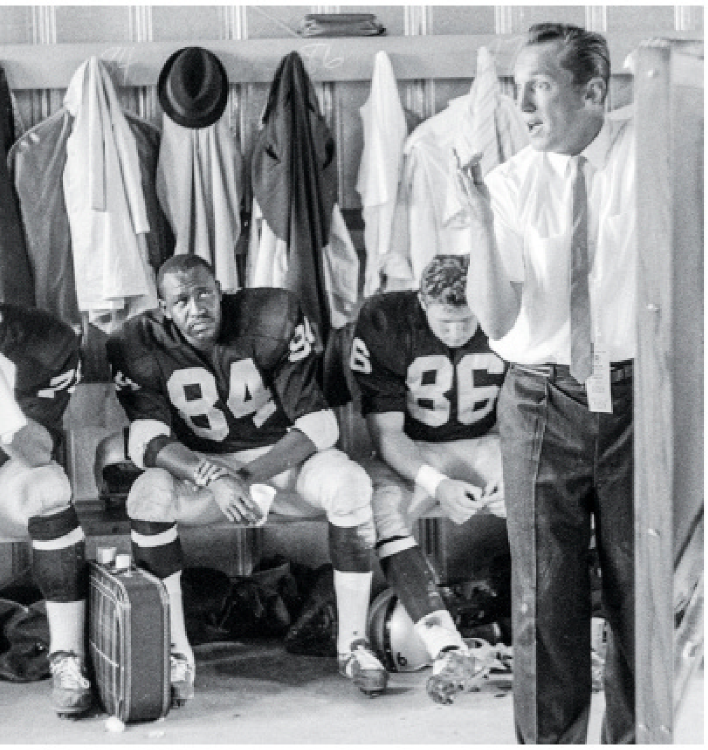
so Davis cut him, and Millen decamped to San Francisco where he joined the 49ers.

Not only were there no hard feelings, the owner and his former player stayed in touch, even in the immediate aftermath. And, inevitably, their conversations turned to football. The sport "was such a part of him, it was unavoidable," says Millen. "It's not like he was talking about his vacations or his golf game."

In part because Millen was playing for a competing team, and in part because Davis cut what might charitably be called a polarizing figure, Millen did not advertise that he still spoke regularly with his old boss (who didn't believe in saying goodbye and abruptly hung up when he'd said his piece). But talk they did, and during one late-night conversation Davis casually mentioned that he'd also long spoken to the man who'd just stepped down as Niners coach, Bill Walsh—which Millen at first thought odd. Wasn't Walsh, longtime coach from the team across the Bay, supposed to be the hated enemy?

The more Millen thought about it, though, the more sense it made. Why wouldn't a coach avail himself of one of the most agile and razored football minds he'd ever encountered? Why not seek Davis's insight on everything from formation to motivation?

In 1966, Walsh had been an assistant coach under Oakland's undeniably brilliant and undeniably combative general manager, Davis. The two men were close in age and shared a similar football belief system. Davis would move on to become the Raiders' majority owner, and Walsh would move on to a series of coaching jobs, his trajectory arcing ever upward, toward the Hall of Fame. In the early '80s, Walsh's teams were competing with Davis's for Lombardi Trophies—and yet the two men stayed in regular contact. Like Millen, Walsh didn't advertise it.



RAIDERS DIGEST

Davis's very early days: just before (left) and two days after his debut game in Oakland, a 35–17 win over the Bills.

One time, in conversation, Davis casually mentioned to Walsh that he'd been speaking, too, with the 49ers' young owner, Eddie DeBartolo Jr., another eventual Hall of Famer—which Walsh, too, at first thought odd. Wasn't DeBartolo supposed to be a competitor, if not an enemy combatant? The more Walsh thought about it, though, the more sense it made. Why wouldn't an owner avail himself of one of the most agile and razored business minds he'd ever encountered? Why not seek the man's insight on everything from stadium financing to relocation?

Here was the perfect encapsulation of Al Davis. His football acumen was such that a player on a rival team would call him in the middle of the season to talk shop. His strategic acumen was such that the old coach of this same player's team would call during the season to talk X's and O's. His business acumen was such that this same coach's owner would call during the season to talk about how to master the universe. "He knew more about the NFL," says Millen, "than the NFL knew about itself."

Today, if football fans under 40 know Al Davis at all, it's likely as the pompadoured persona non grata, decked out in gaudy jewelry, a white polyester tracksuit and a dismissive sneer. In his later years, when owners became as notorious and as prominent as star players, Davis was a sort of NFL anticelebrity, dressing, speaking and running his team as if trapped in another era. But there's an abiding irony to all this: No single figure has done more to shape the modern NFL.

Name a resonant issue, theme or innovation that pertains to pro football in 2019—offenses predicated on passing, teams moving markets, the NFL as the dominant American sport—and odds are good that Davis preordained it. Name a signature moment in league history and Davis, most likely, was there. Name a transformative figure and Davis, you can safely guess, had a connection.

Not unlike the NFL itself, more powerful and yet more maligned than any other league, Davis was—how to put this?—an *acquired taste*. Here was a man who thrived on conflict, almost as if incapable of functioning unless locked in a feud. With his players and coaches. With other owners. With his city. With the media. Above all, with the league itself. Even his loyalists today choose their words with a pained precision. "Difficult genius" is a phrase in common rotation. Some go further. "He was prickly, which can be shortened to 'prick,' " says Frank Hawkins, a top NFL exec in the '90s and '00s. "And I'm one of the ones who *liked* Al."

But Davis's influence is, unmistakably, everywhere, from Jerry Jones's micromanaging to Bill Belichick's shroud of secrecy. The spread offense that has Patrick Mahomes throwing almost 40 times a game? It bears Davis's fingerprints. The premium the league places on speed? Sean McVay and the trend toward younger coaches? Mel Kiper Jr. and the rise of the scouting industrial complex? Even, ironically, the Raiders' impending departure to Las Vegas? All traceable back to Davis.

The occasion of the league's 100th anniversary marks as good a time as any to consider—and reconsider—a man too often caricatured as the NFL's cartoon villain. Under the leather jacket and beneath the slicked-back hair there resided a mass of connective tissue. For all of Davis's bluster and bravado and brashness, through him we can braid together the league's past, present and even its future.

CURT GUNTHER (2)

LONG BEFORE Brooklyn became the hipster haven of today, it was something else entirely. In the 1940s, New York City's most populous borough was sliced into ethnic neighborhoods, and while each enclave was distinct, there were shared characteristics. Moods soared and sank based largely on the outcome of the latest Dodgers game. There was a push-pull between loyalty to the ethnicity of the neighborhood and loyalty to the United States. And there was a pulsing sense of possibility, a belief in a greater world beyond the Brooklyn Bridge.

In Flatbush, at Erasmus Hall High, then the largest public school in the country, a teenager named Al Davis grew fixated on how he could stand out from the area's other Jews (and Italians and Irishmen)—and, in turn, how he could get out. He wasn't the brightest kid, nor the most athletic, endowed as he was with a skinny, angular frame and average coordination. One point of differentiation: Davis's force of personality. "Al Davis," recalled Lawrence Kallenberg, a Brooklyn contemporary from a rival school, "*made* you notice him."

Simultaneously, a mile away, another Jewish striver, Woody Allen, was fashioning his own Brooklyn escape. Among other comedic characters, Allen would conceive of Leonard Zelig, a figure who could insinuate himself into any situation. Davis, likewise, moved easily among tribes, taking on characteristics of others and placing himself in great historical moments. Classmates would later be surprised to learn Davis *wasn't* the star QB, the valedictorian or the toughest kid at Erasmus Hall. He was just a Zelig who passed himself off that way.

Belichick's shroud of secrecy. Mahomes and the spread O. McVay and the trend toward younger coaches. All traceable back to Davis.

In college, at Syracuse, Davis tried out for the baseball and basketball teams. Only after failing at those did he turn to football. And while he didn't actually play, he became obsessed with strategy, attending practices and taking notes, trying, in a sense, to hack the sport. Eventually he was chased off by coach Ben Schwartzwalder, convinced that Davis was spying for another team.

After graduation, in 1950, Davis interviewed for college coaching positions and, according to Mark Ribowsky's '91 biography *Slick*, showed up at Adelphi College representing himself as Syracuse football star George Davis. Al Davis was eventually put in charge of the freshman team.

After two years at Adelphi, Davis was conscripted into the Army. There, too, he coached football (and avoided being sent to Korea). He seized on the idea of compiling scouting information on his players and offered to sell his guides to NFL teams. Impressed by these guides and by his predictive powers, Baltimore Colts coach Weeb Ewbank (Hall of Fame class of '78) hired Davis as a freelance scout. (Anyone with a thing for symmetry will note that two decades later the head coach of the same organization would be the first to employ a young football savant named Bill Belichick, as a personal assistant.) Davis parlayed that gig into a full-time assistant position at the Citadel, where in true Zelig spirit he layered his Brooklyn accent with a Southern drawl and inflection.

By 1960, Davis had graduated from college to pro football, taking a job in the fledgling AFL as a receivers specialist for L.A. Chargers coach Sid Gillman. They made for an odd couple, Gillman and Davis. Gillman (Hall class of '83) was given to wearing bow ties, his pants pulled above his waist. He delivered his words in rapid, quick-burst cadences. Davis, in contrast, wore silver chains, a James Dean hairstyle and spoke leisurely, not unlike a young Christopher Walken.

Gillman and Davis, though, carved out plenty of common ground, from their Jewish upbringings to their almost devotional commitment to relentless strike-first-strike-often offense. Vince Lombardi, with his power sweeps, envisioned football at the time as a game of incremental gains. Neither Gillman nor Davis, though, had the patience for that. Their football axis was vertical, not horizontal. You stretch defenses. Put up points. Throw the ball early, often and down the damn field to players like Lance Alworth (class of '78), whom Davis presented a contract and signed for L.A. after racing onto the field as soon as Alworth finished his last college game, at Arkansas. If that worldview put Davis at odds with the traditionalists—among them, fellow Chargers assistant Chuck Noll (class of '93)—so be it.

As Davis explained his organizing principles to NFL Films: "I had to have certain philosophies that had to become part of what I was to do. We weren't looking for first downs. We didn't want to move the chains. We wanted touchdowns. We wanted the big play, the quick strike."

UP THE California coast, meanwhile, the expansion Oakland Raiders went through three coaches in three years and in 1963 were looking for number 4—someone to right a team that had just gone 1–13. They turned to Davis. Wayne Valley, then the managing general partner of the team's ownership collective, later stated, "We needed someone who wanted to win so badly he would do anything. Everywhere I went, people told me what a son of a bitch Al Davis was. So I figured he must be doing something right."

When the Raiders first offered the job, Davis, then 33, declined, demanding a long-term deal. The team returned with a three-year proposal and he agreed, earning AFL coach of the year and leading Oakland to 10–4, which persists as one of the great turnarounds in football history.

By 1966 the NFL and the AFL were locked in a pitched battle, competing for players, the former trying to put

LOUIS DELUCA (ON FIELD); HEINZ KLUETMEIER (WITH LOMBARDI TROPHY)

the latter out of business. At the AFL's annual meeting that spring, commissioner Joe Foss resigned, likely before he was pushed out. Though Davis had no management experience at a league level, he did have that force of personality, and so he was summoned as the new commissioner. He was 36.

Pitted against his NFL counterpart, Davis versus commissioner Pete Rozelle made for great theater. A smiling extrovert, Rozelle (class of '85) came from a p.r. background, but he shared Davis's fondness for power. In '63 Rozelle had been named SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's Sportsman of the Year for "making vigorous decisions, not all of them popular, and proving that he could act independently of the owners who hired him."

Davis, too, approached his commissionership as something other than a figurehead. The NFL was not a competitor in a business dispute; it was an enemy in battle. And Davis was the general.

Valley, reading concern about this approach among AFL owners, tried to reframe Davis in the most benign light possible. "Al's his own boss, his own guy," he tried to reassure. "He doesn't wear any man's saddle." Davis himself was considerably less diplomatic. "Give us about three months to get organized," he said, "and we'll drop a bomb somewhere."

Which he did. Under Davis's militaristic leadership the AFL took the fighting to a new front. Beyond competing for rookies, the league would now try to poach its competitor's veterans. Oakland, for instance, signed Rams quarterback Roman Gabriel to a contract in 1966 that began immediately after his NFL deal expired. AFL teams began similar negotiations with NFL stars like Bears tight end Mike Ditka and 49ers QB John Brodie. This was an escalation to war.

PRIDE AND POISE AND POLYESTER

Davis was a man of the people—both with players and coaches [after SB XV, alongside Flores and Shell, whom the owner empowered].

In the end, two of the leagues' less hawkish execs, Lamar Hunt of the AFL's Chiefs and Tex Schramm of the NFL's Cowboys, met—often in secret, to avoid Davis's wrath—and discussed a path to peace. And in the summer of '66 the two outfits merged under the NFL banner. Rozelle would remain as commissioner; Davis would return to the Raiders.

By any accounting, the merger marked one of the pivotal hinge points in NFL history: The league was now unified, fortified and, for the first time, held a monopoly on the pro game. Davis's hardline aggression was a brilliant gambit that, purposefully or not, forced the compromise.

But the compromise also etched battle lines between Davis and Rozelle and, by extension, put Davis on the wrong side of NFL mythmakers. "Sometimes I will look through the history and it's like he's been written out," says Millen. "I'll be like, 'Where's Al?' It makes me sick. The merger? They [honor] Lamar Hunt. He brokered a deal. But that deal doesn't happen without Al Davis. Al forced them to do something."

Meanwhile, an idea that Davis (among others) championed, pitting the best AFL team against the best NFL team once each season, was taking hold. The AFL-NFL world championship game was first held on Jan. 15, 1967, with Lombardi's Packers beating the Chiefs in front of 61,946 fans at the L.A. Coliseum, far from a sellout. The following season, the Raiders represented the AFL, falling to Green Bay. By then the nickname for this game had stuck, and everyone began referring to it as the Super Bowl.

BACK IN Oakland, Davis found himself in the role best suited to his skill set: minority owner (after Valley carved out a 10% stake for him) and GM. For a man who always fashioned himself as smarter and savvier than his competitors—and his colleagues, for that matter—here was his chance to prove it. The self-styled maverick who actively reviled conventional wisdom could build his roster and accumulate power.

In his prime Davis was endowed with a sixth sense for assessing talent. Let everyone else scout USC, Oklahoma, all the college powerhouses. Davis dispatched his men—and often went himself—to backwaters like minuscule Maryland State, where he found bedrock tackle Art Shell (class of '89). He took special pleasure in finding unmined gems at historically black schools. In '68 he made Tennessee State's Eldridge Dickey the first black QB ever selected in the first round.

While this was all in keeping with Davis's sensibilities—his left-of-center political leaning, his esteem for the outsider and the underdog—it was also guided by free-market pragmatism. Why not draw your workforce from the largest labor pool possible? (In this way the trailblazing nature of his drafting Dickey is undercut, in a sense, by the QB's immediate forced move to receiver.)

Bottom line: Davis approached his roster construction as broadly and as creatively as possible. Again and again he found discarded players and transformed them into stars. Long before Kurt Warner was discovered stocking grocery shelves, Davis was combing the equivalent of clearance aisles. His Raiders teams, as Ribowsky put it, were made up of "oddities and irregulars, factory seconds and chain-gang escapees." Jim Plunkett, for one, had been cut by the 49ers before Davis transformed him into a Super Bowl QB. One of Plunkett's favorite targets, Todd Christensen, had been cut by four different teams before Davis thought otherwise. Defensive end John Matuszak, the top pick by the Houston Oilers in 1973, was a wild and woolly washout . . . until Davis revived his career.

"He could always spot players who were undervalued," says Hawkins. "He was Billy Beane before Billy Beane."

Davis discounted conventional metrics and emphasized his own. He placed particular value on speed. You could add bulk and improve technique, he figured, but your ability to beat an opponent to the spot was crucial, especially in the vertical game.

YOU CAN'T SPELL FOOTBALL WITHOUT AL

BYE, BYE, BAY-BY

Oaklanders begged Davis to stick around in '80 (right); 31 years later (left) they bid him adieu for good.

This obsession with acceleration was so intense and unwavering that friends today suggest it underscored his toxic relationship with Marcus Allen. Yes, the running back held out (and eventually sued the Raiders to become a free agent, in 1991), but that was nothing compared to Allen's mortal sin, in Davis's eyes, of lacking quickness. One Raiders exec back then told the *Los Angeles Times*, "Al is upset because Marcus can't run fast enough. . . . Of all the silly damn things. Marcus will be in the Hall of Fame and Al will say, 'Yeah, but he could only run 4.7 [in the 40-yard dash].' "

Davis versus Allen (class of '03) was, famously, less a feud than a war. But it was also an exception. For all of Davis's quirks, this might be the most pronounced: Despite the fact that he was never a player, he was—Allen aside—uncommonly sympathetic toward his foot soldiers. "One of Al's firmest beliefs was standing on the side of players," says Hue Jackson, who coached the Raiders in '11. "In his mind, without them there is no league."

It's likely no coincidence that longtime NFLPA head Gene Upshaw (class of '87) played his whole career in a Raiders organization that viewed players as the lifeblood of the sport—as *people*, not dispensable labor. It's no stretch to suggest Davis's most enduring legacy resides in this sensibility, which expresses itself today in everything from health and safety issues to the right to protest.

In Jackson's first month as Raiders coach he suggested organizing a spring alumni gathering. Davis had two conditions: 1) No alcohol. 2) He needed to see the guest list before invitations went out. Jackson understood the first rule—"Who knows what could happen; I'd heard all the stories." As for the second, it eventually surfaced that Davis was slipping payments out of his own pocket to retired Raiders who'd fallen on hard times, and here he wanted to be sure attendees didn't share this information, potentially creating jealousies or shame. "He was a dictator in his way," says Jackson, "but he always dictated from the good."

Sometimes this entailed crafting creative solutions. "He thinks of things other people don't think of," Mike Madden, a former Raiders exec, once marveled. "He prides himself on that. You know when Dallas drafted Herschel Walker, a star halfback in the USFL, using a low-round pick [in 1985], Al was kicking himself. 'That's never going to happen again—that's something *I* do.' "

So it was that two years later the Raiders took a seventh-round flyer on a running back from Auburn. Bo Jackson had left football behind and was playing pro baseball, but Davis had a plan: The two seasons didn't overlap much; tell Jackson he could moonlight. "It was an unbelievable move," Madden said. "Don't ask him to [pick a sport]? Who else would have thought of that?"

Mike Madden spoke from professional and personal experience. His father, John, was a 32-year-old linebackers coach when Davis offered him the Raiders' top job, in 1969. No matter that John Madden had never been a head coach at anything above a junior college. Davis deemed him the best man for the position, a notion Madden (class of 2006) supported with seven division titles, one Super Bowl win (XI) and nary a season under .500.

After Madden—who remained fiercely loyal to his old boss, though he did say Al "isn't for everyone"—Davis hired Tom Flores, in 1979, making him just the second Latino head coach in pro football. (Flores would later become the first minority head coach to win a Super Bowl.) Given plenty of opportunity to take a victory lap for this diversity hire, Davis declined. He knew Flores only as a former Raiders QB who, in Davis's estimation, was the most qualified man for the job.

In 1989, Davis made Art Shell the first black NFL coach

EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES

SAVE OUR RAIDERS!

AL GOLUB/AP

in the modern era. Again, Raiders employees encouraged the owner to embrace a moment of favorable publicity. He declined. “I got the best guy,” he muttered. “End of story.”

This open-mindedness—and humility—applied not only to coaches. In 1983, Davis hired Amy Trask as a legal intern tasked chiefly with helping the Raiders win their battle with the NFL over their move to L.A. Over the next three decades Trask rose within the organization, including a stint as CEO. “He was ahead of his time in many, many, many regards,” says Trask, now an analyst for CBS. “He hired people—and, yeah, fired and cussed at people—without regard to race, gender, religion, ethnicity or any of these individualities.”

As Davis obsessed through the years over the thermodynamics of winning, he reached a conclusion. Part of victory entailed superior players executing superior plays; the “army of men,” as Davis called his teams, had to operate with discipline and precision. But winning also came from differentiating your team. Much as Davis loved the NFL, his motivation also came from ensuring his Raiders stood apart from the rest of the league.

To that end, he devoted great time and energy to what we would now call “building brand loyalty.” Though colorblind himself—not only figuratively, but literally—he recognized the symbolic power of image and design, so much so that in 1963 he unilaterally changed the Raiders’ colors from black and gold to silver and black, dressing himself in that scheme seven days a week.

So, too, did Davis grasp the power of the slogan. There are entire Madison Avenue creative agencies that have yet to concoct a single catch phrase as potent as any of Davis’s three gems. *Pride and Poise. Commitment to Excellence.* And, of course, *Just Win, Baby.*

As Davis was coming up, sports owners were largely faceless. (Name the owner of, say, the 1984 Detroit Tigers. What does Joe Robbie look like?) But Davis knew that he, personally, could play a role in the Raiders’ singular mystique, and he cultivated a celebrity force field to rival that of his players. He’d stand on the 50-yard line during warmups, glowering at the opposition. While he seldom gave interviews, he made sure TV producers knew where he’d be sitting during games—a leaf of playbook that Jones and Robert Kraft, among others, have lifted.

Another of Davis’s organizing principles entailed seeking every conceivable competitive advantage, on the field and off. Sometimes this meant smudging the line between gamesmanship and cheating; sometimes it meant swerving over the median. Teams reliant on the running game complained that when they played in Oakland, the grass was soggy from overwatering. They reported seeing strange men in the bleachers when they practiced.

Some of the accusations were real. Lester Hayes *did* put Stickum on his hands to aid in intercepting. Davis himself *did* use the occasion of Valley’s attending the 1972 Summer Olympics, in Munich, to get a leg up: He drafted a revised partnership agreement, making himself the franchise’s managing partner and de facto general manager, with virtually unchecked powers.

Some of the charges were imagined. Harland Svare, the Chargers’ coach in the early ’70s, was so convinced the Raiders were spying on him that he would yell into the lights of Oakland Coliseum’s visiting locker room, “Al Davis, I know you’re up there!” Davis later responded, “The thing wasn’t in the light fixture, I’ll tell you that.” But it didn’t matter. For Davis, every moment an opposing team spent worrying about hidden surveillance cameras—or bugs in the locker room or underinflated footballs—was a moment diverted from preparation. Belichick, an unapologetic admirer of Davis’s, elevated this art, such as it is.

Davis sought competitive advantages outside the scope of the game, too. In 1980, figuring his team was better off in Southern California than the East Bay, he attempted to move the Raiders to L.A. NFL owners voted unanimously against the move, but Davis armed himself with an injunction. Afterward, the football lifer wedded to attacking offense filed an antitrust suit.

That Davis ultimately won in court only emboldened him. When an upstart rival league, the USFL, filed its own antitrust suit against the NFL in 1986, it was Davis, alone among the owners, who sided with the USFL in agreeing: The NFL did operate in anticompetitive ways.

Davis's Raiders eventually moved back to Oakland, threatened a move to Sacramento, then to Silicon Valley. Altogether, there are too many motions and threats and lawsuits to catalog here, but they distill to this: Like an activist for states' rights fighting a large, centralized government, Davis believed individual teams should hold more autonomy and power than the league itself. This debate over whether the NFL is a single entity or a collection of 32 teams would persist for decades, undergirding everything from free agency to licensing deals.

One legacy of Davis's litigiousness: In 1997 the NFL passed a rule mandating that if a franchise sued the league and lost, it had to pay the league's legal fees. "That was deliberately to make sure Al would feel the pain if he sued again," says Hawkins. Another move aimed rather obviously at Davis: After his various innovations (schemes?) to protect Raiders revenue from NFL money pools, the league added a provision: If a team refuses to pay assessments, the commissioner can in return withhold TV-revenue distributions. "He was a maverick," says Hawkins. "And yet he contributed in a backhanded way—by being such a total pain in the ass—to a lot of the centralization of the league's power."

And this is a critical point. Davis's influence was often for good. But sometimes it was for ill. Sometimes his impact came, unintendedly, in the attempts of others to stop him. Or to emulate his ways.

The impatience of owners—and, in turn, fans—who think they know better than the coach? Before it became voguish among owners, Davis was putting his coaches on a perpetual hot seat. Glenn Dickey, a longtime Raiders beat writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, remembers watching Davis pace the concourse of the Miami airport in 1970. Oakland, coming off a 12-1-1 season under Madden, had just lost a Week 3 game to the Dolphins, and here Davis wondered aloud whether he should fire the coach, who was in his second season.

Likewise, when Jones takes a hands-on approach to Cowboys football matters, he has a precedent. Davis, often seated in the press box on the road, would scribble plays and formations on small pieces of paper during games. When sequences weren't executed, he'd pound a fist on the table. More than once, reporters overheard a Davis acolyte call down to the sideline on behalf of the boss: "Mr. Davis wants a new quarterback now."

Calling Davis a micromanager would be an act of definitional courtesy. Never mind his insistence on being the one to hire assistant coaches, a duty usually conferred on the head coach. He also approved the wording on brochures sent to season-ticket holders. He once told defensive tackle Tom Keating that he controlled the organization down to the wastebaskets.

Hue Jackson recalls that when he interviewed with Davis for the top job, Davis spent most of their three hours diagramming plays on a whiteboard. "I'd never had that kind of interaction with an owner," says Jackson, "where you're not talking about marketing or staffing, but zone schemes and counter-schemes." When Jackson got the job, Davis, then 81, informed him, "You run the team. And you run the offense. But I run the defense."

100 OBJECTS THAT SHAPED THE LEAGUE

From Davis's dapper shades to Deion Sanders's bandana, we cover a century of NFL in 100 inanimate items at TheMMQB.com

Bob Mansbach, a longtime NFL producer for CBS, recalls once visiting Davis's Marina del Rey apartment and finding "Al sitting alone in this small place. He's watching game tape and scribbling down plays on a pad that he's going to give to Tom Flores."

Davis had few close friends, at least outside of football. "I'm not really part of society," he once said. Despite his wealth and his fascination for World War II, he traveled to Europe for the first time only when the Raiders played a London exhibition game in 1990. He was 61.

In so many ways Davis prefigured today's workaholic NFL exec. He lived alone through the Raiders' L.A. years, encouraging his wife, Carole, to remain in the East Bay. When his assistants took dinner breaks, he would lift weights and run, reading NFL newspaper clips on the

PETER READ MILLER

treadmill. When he ate, late at night, often alone, he had a phone brought to his table so he could take work calls.

Even in the years before his 2011 death, at 82, Davis was still attending owners' meetings, still asking indelicate questions, still pushing boundaries. Matt Millen was in attendance for some of those sessions, representing the Lions, for whom he was GM. And Millen noticed that when Davis raised his hand to speak, other owners would snicker and giggle. "It used to piss me off," Millen says. "Here's a guy who *was* the NFL. He didn't just see the changes, he made the changes. He had a tie to everyone from George Halas to Vince Lombardi to John Madden to Joe Gibbs to Bill Belichick. They thought he'd lost his fastball? He was still two levels ahead."

On the subject of two levels: Go up to the second floor of the Raiders' corporate facility in Alameda, head to the back and there sits Davis's old office, untouched, out of some combination of tribute and superstition. Davis's personal effects still dot his desk, his art still lines the walls, his books—mostly covering football and the Brooklyn Dodgers—still occupy the shelves. Occasionally Mark Davis, Al and Carole's son as well as the Raiders' current owner, will duck in to take a call. But otherwise the office is akin to a museum exhibit, the workplace of a transformative figure, that must be preserved.

What would Davis make of the NFL in 2019? "He would see it as soft," says Jackson—"more about money than the love of the game."

» **SUCH IS** the life cycle of a pioneer, as well as the nature of competition and capitalism: Others build on ideas and refine concepts, catching up and often turning the innovator into a laggard. You could make the case that Al Davis became a victim of his own visionary success.

His vertical game? Innumerable pass-happy coaches have taken elements and evolved it. Davis's states' rights philosophy would undergird the Cowboys' commercial wars with the NFL and the Patriots' us-against-the-league ethos. Since the Raiders moved to L.A., a half-dozen other teams have moved markets, and virtually every franchise has threatened relocation. (To paraphrase Svare: "Al Davis, I know you're in there!")

Davis knew he was onto something when he recognized the importance of talent assessment, of gauging when a player would hit or pass his prime. This turned into analytics departments, and eventually the Raiders lost this competitive advantage.

Team slogans would be outsourced to marketing departments. Color schemes wouldn't be approved until they fared well with focus groups. *Silver-and-black is a good start—but what if we added a splash of teal?*

Beyond that, the very idea of Davis would become obsolete. The NFL would become a league of specialization. A football Zelig whose NFL CV included entries for scout, position coach, head coach, GM and owner would be as absurd today as a two-way player who also kicked field goals.

What would Davis make of the NFL in 2019? Would he be pleased that franchise valuations start around $2 billion, a vivid illustration of football's growth as a business? Or would he be resentful that teams are available for purchase only to titans of finance?

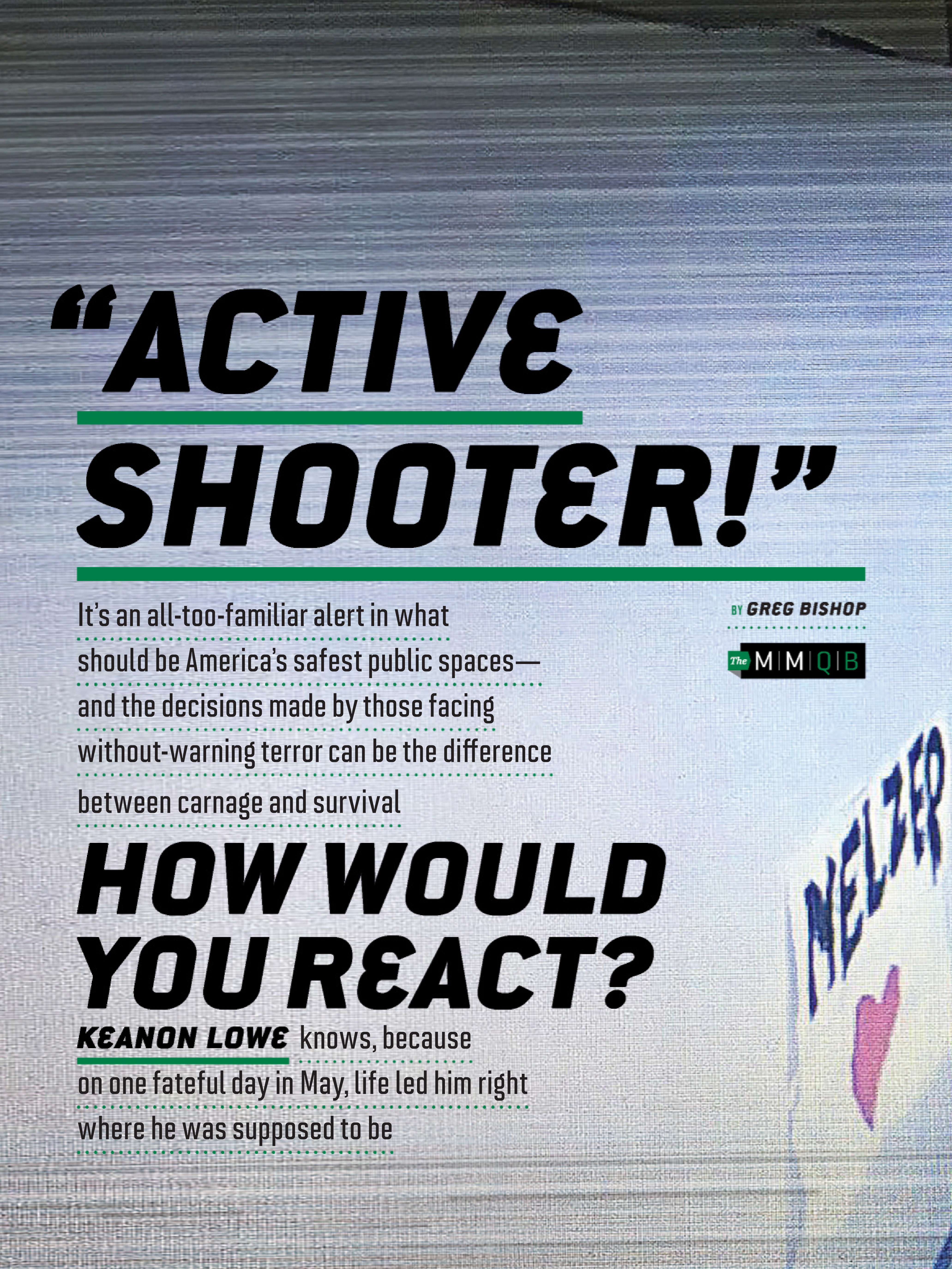
Would the tough guy prone to military analogies—the man who famously said, "The quarterback must go down, and he must go down hard"—cringe at the rules protecting passers as a profaning of his sacred game? Or would the godfather of the aerial assault be pleased by the effort to safeguard the men throwing those bombs?

"He would probably see it as soft," says Jackson, chuckling, "that it's more about money than the love of the game."

Would he be pleased that today's Raiders, revisiting the trail Davis first blazed in the 1980s, are relocating after finding a more hospitable and profitable market in Vegas? Or would he fear that the East Bay and the fan base cultivated in his image would be left bereft? Would he accept the attention that comes with *Hard Knocks* as another of his brand extensions? Or would he resent the media gadflies invading his foxholes and war rooms?

For her part, Trask has given much thought to how her old boss would have reacted to the recent anthem protests, given that they would have pitted his deep sense of individualism against his deep sense of patriotism. "It would have been a fascinating conversation," she says. "He would have talked about the right to peaceful protest, and how quintessentially important it is to this country. And yet he would have discussed his great love for the country and the people who served it. Not everything is binary, and Al knew that."

One would hope, though, that Davis would scan the NFL landscape and realize: He had not just won, baby. He had conquered. He had laid the groundwork for so much, and now others could build on his ideas. This would mark a rare time Al Davis would be happy to have others take the ball and run with it. ▸



“ACTIVE SHOOTER!”

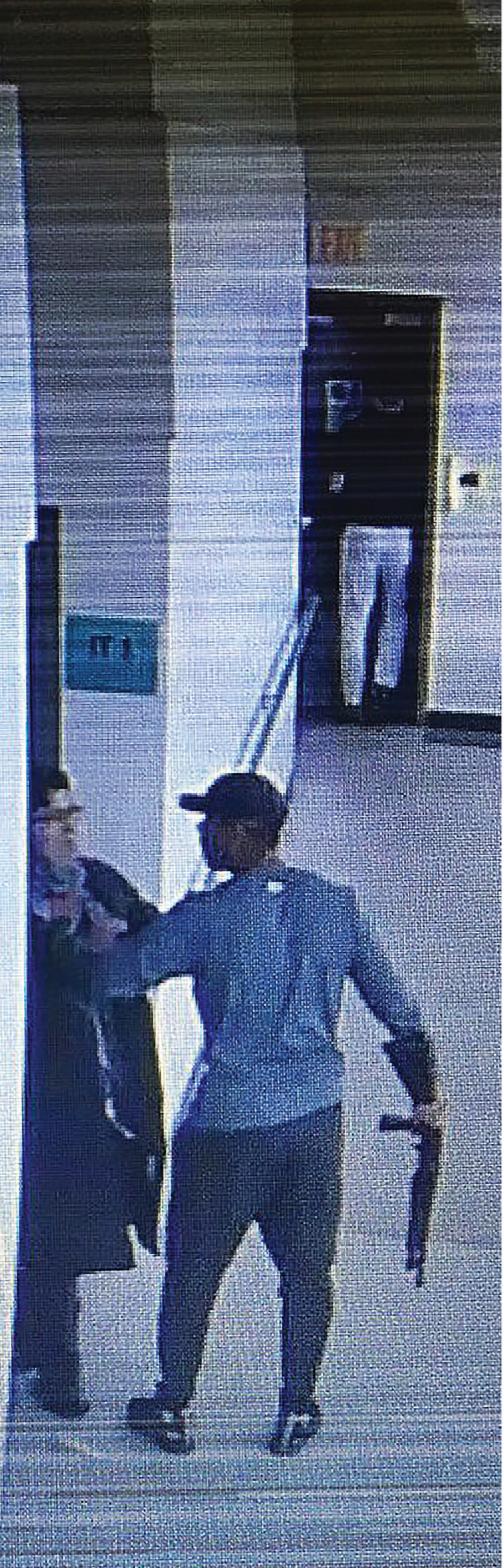
It’s an all-too-familiar alert in what should be America’s safest public spaces—and the decisions made by those facing without-warning terror can be the difference between carnage and survival

BY **GREG BISHOP**

The MMQB

HOW WOULD YOU REACT?

KEANON LOWE knows, because on one fateful day in May, life led him right where he was supposed to be



K

KEANON LOWE woke up early on May 17 at his modest house in northeast Portland. He drank coffee, ate a bagel and an apple, and drove his dented Jeep Cherokee to Parkrose High, a big school in an economically challenged part of town, where he let football players into the weight room and started preparing for Day 2 of the conference track meet.

By 8 o'clock he'd settled into a cramped, sparsely decorated office adjacent to the cafeteria. At 27 he was coaching Parkrose's football and track teams, two low-paying gigs made palatable only by his full-time job as a campus security guard. He shared this space with the school's other unarmed watchmen, one of whom he told to go ahead and take his lunch first. Then, at 11:30, 20 minutes after the fourth-period bell, the call came: "Can you go get Angel Granados-Diaz from the Fine Arts Building and bring him to the counselor's office?"

Lowe sighed. The guards always grumbled about the walk to what they called the "Fab building," a couple hundred feet away from the main school, out near the athletic fields. He went on his way, though, alternately joking with students about prom and reminding them to get to class. The sun beamed. He remembers seeing groundskeepers lining a softball field, remembers opening the Fab door, remembers noticing a student step out of the boys' restroom and quickly pop back inside.

At first Lowe went to the wrong room, Mr. Hume's Health class. He wanted Mr. Melzer's Government room, and eventually he found it down the hall, where a substitute teacher was in charge. Lowe asked the sub about Granados-Diaz, an 18-year-old senior, when the door opened and a mop-haired kid in glasses and a black trench coat burst in, setting off screams from the students.

Angel Granados-Diaz—the same kid from the bathroom; the same teenager Lowe had been sent to retrieve—stood within arm's reach. And he was carrying a shotgun.

KEANON LOWE grew up in the Portland suburb of Gresham, eight miles west of Parkrose, across the Willamette River. He was a mild-mannered and observant boy, someone who looked for responsibilities to shoulder and always watched over everybody else. When Jennifer Lowe gave birth to another son, Trey, it was Keanon who held her hand through labor. He was seven.

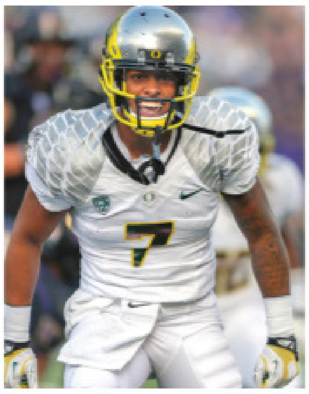
Over the years Jennifer adopted a family motto to explain to her kids why, for example, money was sometimes tight. Or why their father, Kevin, moved out around the time Keanon was nine. (Keanon would reconnect with his father in high school.) *You are where you're supposed to be*, she'd say. And for Keanon that often meant on a football field. While Jennifer "worked her a-- off"—Keanon's words—as an accountant for a software company to pay private school tuition, Keanon started in 2006 at Jesuit High, near Nike's headquarters, where he met Dominique Forrest and Taylor Martinek, who would become two of his best friends.

> ***Kelly taught his players that "pressure is what you feel when you don't know what you're doing." He told them never to flinch. "He taught me to act and not think," says Lowe.***

The trio bonded instantly, and between sleepovers they transformed the Crusaders into a gridiron force. Forrest and Martinek were the hard-hitting linebackers. Lowe was the receiver–running back who scored what seemed like a million times. When their careers culminated in the 2009 Class 6A state championship game and Lowe racked up six TDs in a losing effort, recruiters salivated. Among them: Oregon coach Chip Kelly, who visited Jesuit and found not just a 5' 9" offensive threat with elite speed and sure hands but one who was equally respected by his football coaches and his math teachers.

Lowe came to realize he didn't always have to be so serious. In Martinek, his opposite—a bro, quick with jokes, who made allies easily and rarely stressed—he saw what life might be like if he unwound a little. Still, "Keanon was like the dad of the group," says his older sister, Alisa Depp. When Alisa dropped out of college, it was Keanon, still in high school, imploring her to keep out of trouble, to not get pregnant.

Faced with his pick of pretty much any big-time West Coast school, Lowe accepted a scholarship at Oregon, where he endured Kelly's early challenges—"You will never play a f------ down," he screamed early on, after Keanon missed a voluntary workout—and rose to meet the coach's notoriously exacting standards. He embraced the former military instructors who paced the Ducks through Navy SEALs workouts, sprinting between drills as Oregon built the fastest offense in college football and climbed the national rankings. Meanwhile, Lowe befriended blue-chippers, like quarterback Marcus Mariota, and hung out with the walk-ons, channeling his inner, looser Martinek.



LOWE BALLED

Keanon rose to Kelly's high standards first with the Ducks, then with the Niners (in red).

Lowe scratched his way into a role on the kickoff coverage team, then at receiver, then, before his senior year, he was chosen by his teammates to be a captain. He'd travel around the state on open weekends to watch his old friends play in college—Forrest at Division III Linfield, Martinek at Portland State—then go back to emulating them off the field at UO. And it worked. Ayele Adika, a running back alongside Lowe for five years, remembers he "could move people's hearts and [they] followed him." Lowe, says Kelly, "transcended all classes, all races, all socioeconomic backgrounds; he just fit in."

Kelly taught his players that "pressure is what you feel when you don't know what you're doing." He told them to never flinch, and when he left in 2013 to coach the NFL's Eagles he promised he would always try to

PREVIOUS SPREAD: COURTESY KEANON LOWE: OTTO GREULE JR/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT)

take care of his old charges. “That program molded my life and shaped my mentality,” Lowe says. “I’m glad Chip yelled at me. I deserved it. He taught me to act and not think.”

LOWE’S PLAYING career concluded like so many others: He went out on a high, catching the first TD in a College Football Playoff national championship game, a loss to Ohio State in January 2015, and then faced the harsh realities of The End. He resolved to make a go at the NFL, even though he knew that with 68 career catches, 891 yards and 11 TDs, his chances fell somewhere between long shot and *Come on, dude*.

After running a 4.4-second 40 at his pro day in Eugene he landed a tryout with the Cardinals as an undrafted free agent—which lasted all of four days. In the end he netted no more than a few pairs of Arizona gym shorts out of it. “But I didn’t have any regrets,” he says.

Lowe moved back home and considered applying for a job at Nike. Then a strange area code popped up on his cellphone. “Keanon, it’s Chip.”

Heading into his third season with the Eagles, Kelly needed an offensive analyst—but more than a football brain, he needed another believer in his system. He calls Lowe an “old soul”; he says he’d never seen the receiver in “an immature moment.” Because of that, he figured Lowe could command the respect of older players and help re-create the old Oregon football ethos.

Lowe was in. He moved across the country to cut up film and fetch coffee, grinding one 15-hour day into the next. On Sundays he’d relay the offensive play calls from the sideline, often sending in the same schemes he’d run himself at Oregon. He found he liked it there, on the sideline; he loved teaching and motivating, and he could power through the grunt work.

The Eagles went a disappointing 7–9 that season, and when the front office fired the entire coaching staff Lowe followed Kelly to San Francisco . . . where together they finished 2–14 in 2016. Kelly got another pink slip, and Lowe found himself again at a crossroad.

At 23, his NFL career in limbo, Lowe hung around the Bay Area, weighing what to do next. Then one night Forrest called. Instantly, Lowe could tell something had gone horribly wrong. “It’s Taylor,” the voice on the other end said.

FOR YEARS Lowe had watched from afar as one of his best friends descended into the dark throes of addiction. Three surgeries—two on his left shoulder, another on a torn left-elbow tendon—had ended Martinek’s college career after three seasons. The once-carefree linebacker ended up strung-out on painkillers, in and out of treatment centers, committing petty crimes, getting into fights, landing in jail, violating parole.

But by 2016 those around Martinek hoped he had made a permanent turn toward sobriety. He completed a treatment program and landed a sales rep job at a local marketing firm; his bosses were aware of his demons and supported his efforts to stay clean. Thanksgiving and Christmas passed without incident. Taylor even got a promotion.

The night of his relapse, Friday, Jan. 13, 2017, Martinek illegally purchased what he thought was Xanax and Oxycontin but instead contained a lethal dose of fentanyl, a synthetic painkiller, 50 times stronger than heroin, which accounts for more than half of all opioid-related deaths in the U.S.

Forrest, who shared an apartment with his old buddy, found Martinek unresponsive the next afternoon, his lips, ears, arms and shoulders all blue. Brian Martinek,

a police chief who'd responded to countless calls like the one he received that day, arrived at the apartment to find familiar flashing lights. His 24-year-old son was dead.

Lowe got the call from Forrest, caught an early flight from San Francisco and was the first grieving visitor at the Martinek home that morning. Privately, he fell into absolute grief: *If only I had been there. Been around. Put Taylor over my ascendant career.*

The NFL grind—even the six-figure paychecks that awaited him if he were promoted to a full-time position coach—no longer seemed all that important. His brother, Trey, then 17, was playing at receiver for Jesuit High, where Brian Martinek was an assistant. Lowe knew he couldn't leave them. He decided that day to come back home, to heal, to entrench in his community. "I was still searching for something," he says. "And I was going to find it." He told his mother, and she offered him her couch. "You are where you're supposed to be," she said.

Lowe volunteered at Jesuit, working with the offensive skill groups, and all season he wore a pin bearing Taylor's face on his left breast, close to his heart. The following spring, in 2018, he found a bigger opportunity.

RIDING HIGH

Lowe put Parkrose on the map again, coaching up players who lacked football knowledge—and sometimes cleats.

There were reasons for the coaching vacancy at Parkrose High: the thin roster, the dilapidated equipment and the 23-game losing streak. But the same kid who responded to Chip Kelly's challenge—*You'll never play a down!*—saw opportunity in such despair. In his job interview Lowe told administrators, "0–23 is nothing; I can turn this thing around in one year."

He had work to do. His best players didn't know what a win felt like. Some were homeless or had lost parents or lacked the money for cleats. The weight room had only four barbells. The practice field was so barren it resembled concrete. Maybe 20 kids showed up for the first workout that summer; to build some basic football knowledge Lowe started giving quizzes with questions like, *How many points is a touchdown worth?*

"We were teaching them things," he says, "so that after *that* we could teach fundamentals. But the biggest thing was not to make excuses. Ever."

Lowe instilled discipline and accountability. He took money from his own wallet for team barbecues and helped players get to and from practice. He taught them the dimensions of the field, the number of downs and what *red zone* meant. For his first intrasquad scrimmage he used trash cans to simulate defenders since he didn't yet have enough players. But they were *his* players, and he taught them how to stretch, eat better and move more efficiently, borrowing from Kelly at every turn.

Parkrose had finished 0–9 the previous year, allowing the most points of any 5A school and scoring the fewest—and then three all-league players graduated. The week of the Broncos' 2018 opener they practiced on a field without lines. On the first snap of their first game under Lowe one player lined up two yards offside. The losing streak moved to 24.

If this felt like the football version of *The Bad News Bears*, what happened next seemed like a movie too. In its second game Parkrose hung 82 on Benson High, shattering the school record for points scored. Lowe expected a Gatorade shower, but that would have entailed his players knowing about the tradition. The Broncos finished 5–5, making the playoffs for only the sixth time in school history. Lowe got his sugar-water bath when Parkrose clinched a spot in the state playoffs. "One of the best moments of my life," he says. *Better than*

JORDAN NAHOLOWA'AMURPH (2)

the national championship touchdown? "Way cooler."

Still, Lowe's mind would drift late at night back to Taylor, the friend he lost to drug addiction. Taylor was the reason he'd stay in Portland even after his success led to other, better offers. He'd take the longer odds, he reasoned, because he could make a greater impact.

STANDING IN Mr. Melzer's Government classroom back in May, Lowe assessed the situation in an instant. Yes, he saw a gun; yes, that gun was real. He remembers Granados-Diaz's eyes and how they widened like an insect's and teared, announcing desperation, anger, confusion. The teenager whipped the shotgun around, turning it on himself as students scattered out the back of the room, shrieking. (Only in the Fab building did classrooms have two doorways.) "It wasn't like a movie," Lowe says. "It was real screaming-for-your-life-type stuff."

He says he never considered ducking or hiding or running. He made a split-second decision: to grab for the gun rather than tackle Granados-Diaz. They wrestled for control, the college football star and the kid who called himself an outsider, who'd told classmates that his girlfriend had broken up with him and whose lawyer would later say in court that he suffered from depression.

Lowe tried desperately to direct the barrel away from both the stampeding horde and from his own face. He and Granados-Diaz knocked into a filing cabinet and spilled into the hallway, where Lowe finally snatched the firearm away, holding Granados-Diaz with his left hand and the shotgun with his right.

In the hall a teacher happened by and Lowe screamed out for her to call police. He remembers her sprinting away, shoes squeaking on the linoleum floors, yelling, "Active shooter!" In control, Lowe handed the gun to another teacher, who bolted back inside a classroom. He remembers seeing the football field and the track through the window, in the distance; he remembers walking Granados-Diaz slowly down the hallway, holding tight to the boy's wrists, one hand on each of his, then guiding him to the floor underneath a security camera and a PARKROSE PRIDE sign. His anger began to melt, giving way to a compassion he couldn't have expected.

The two had never met before, Lowe and Granados-Diaz. Sitting there on the ground, the menace fading from his face, the teenager looked scared, confused, troubled. He kept repeating the same thing, that he didn't want to hurt anyone, that he only planned to shoot himself. "Nobody cares about me!" he screamed.

If You Suffered A Loss Resulting From
THE NORTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRES
You May Be Eligible For Compensation

Read this Notice Carefully, Your Rights May Be Affected
Para información en español, visite www.pgewildfireinfo.com.

What is this about?

The purpose of this notice is to let you know about the Bar Date deadline to file proofs of claim in the Chapter 11 legal cases against Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E). On June 26, 2019, the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Northern District of California overseeing the company's Chapter 11 cases approved the Bar Date of October 21, 2019, at 5:00 p.m. Pacific Time. The Bar Date is the deadline by which any person or entity affected by the Northern California Fires must file a Proof of Claim if they believe money is owed to them by PG&E concerning the period prior to the Chapter 11 filing date of January 29, 2019.

Who does this affect and what are my rights?

If you suffered an injury or wrongful death, property damage, or other loss resulting from the Northern California Fires, you **MUST** file a Claim in PG&E's Chapter 11 cases **NO** later than the court-mandated Bar Date of **OCTOBER 21, 2019** to preserve any rights to payment and timely compensation. If you do not submit a Proof of Claim by the deadline, you may be barred from asserting your claim against PG&E and give up rights to any payment and compensation.

How do I file a claim?

You can file a claim online, by U.S. mail or at one of six PG&E Claim Service Centers. For complete details on who is eligible to file a claim, how to file a claim and the supporting documents you or your representative need to properly file a claim, visit: www.pgewildfireinfo.com or call the toll-free information line: (844) 627-5328.

You can submit a claim in person.

You can file your claim at one of six PG&E Claim Service Centers listed below, beginning July 15, 2019 through October 21, 2019, Monday to Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Pacific Time.

- 350 Salem Street, Chico, CA 95928
- 231 "D" Street, Marysville, CA 95901
- 1850 Soscol Ave., Ste 105, Napa, CA 94559
- 1567 Huntoon Street, Oroville, CA 95965
- 3600 Meadow View Road, Redding, CA 96002
- 111 Stony Circle, Santa Rosa, CA 95401

You may also file your claim by U.S. mail to the court appointed Claims and Noticing Agent:

PG&E Corporation Claims Processing Center
c/o Prime Clerk LLC
Grand Central Station, P.O. Box 4850
New York, NY 10163-4850

Are you the legal representative of the deceased's estate?

You may file a Proof of Claim on their behalf. In addition to any supporting documentation that you provide with the Proof of Claim Form, please include a copy of any documentation identifying you as the legal representative. Detailed information on what you need to file a claim is found on the website below.

This is only a summary.

For more information including important Court documents such as the Bar Date Notice, and other detailed information concerning who is eligible to file a claim, the proof you need to file a claim and how to file it, visit: www.pgewildfireinfo.com, or call (844) 627-5328. You can also sign up for updates relating to the Chapter 11 proceedings and register your email address for electronic notification of important case documents.

"PG&E" refers to Pacific Gas and Electric Company, a subsidiary of PG&E Corporation. (Copyright) 2019 Pacific Gas and Electric Company. All rights reserved.

(844) 627-5328
www.pgewildfireinfo.com

Lowe looked into his eyes. "*I* care about you," he said.

"You do?"

Lowe says that broke his heart, seeing Granados-Diaz raise his head and return his gaze. "I do, bro!" Lowe said. "That's why I'm here. I got you, buddy."

A dozen cops eventually barreled around the corner, guns drawn. (That part scared Lowe the most, as he tried to flip his school ID badge in their direction.) Officers pinned Granados-Diaz facedown, snapping handcuffs around his wrists as Lowe continued to console him.

Only later did it all start to sink in. "Like, holy s---," Lowe says. "I just took a f------ shotgun from this kid."

LOWE SKIPPED the district track meet that afternoon. Instead, after meeting with police, he went back to his mother's house, where his family found him to be remarkably calm. In those first hours he would return just two of the dozens of calls he received after news of the near catastrophe started scrolling across television tickers. First he dialed Kelly, who asked his former player what form he used in subduing Granados-Diaz.

"It's like what you taught me on kickoff coverage, Coach," Lowe responded. "Technique doesn't ultimately matter. Just get him down by any means necessary."

Then he called Brian Martinek. "Taylor was with me," he said. "He was right there the whole time."

In the weeks that followed Lowe would be commended by the U.S. Congress, the Oregon State Senate and the Portland police; he would be gifted Blazers playoff tickets by Damian Lillard and cited by Warriors coach Steve Kerr for his "remarkable act of courage." He would also collect the district's track coach of the year award, an honor he learned about the evening of the altercation. Meanwhile Granados-Diaz was charged with possessing a firearm in public and with reckless endangerment; he pleaded not guilty on May 29. (Police found only one shell in his shotgun.) He is still in custody, due in court on Aug. 23; he could face up to five years in prison.

Lowe hopes that one day he and Granados-Diaz can meet again, under different circumstances. But he's not quite ready to reach out. Not yet.

GOOD CITATIONS

Among those who honored Lowe: the Portland PD, who handed him a Civilian Medal of Heroism.

IT'S JUNE, and Keanon Lowe can only shake his head as he traverses the same Parkrose hallway, touching the white walls. He can still see Granados-Diaz's eyes widen, the other teenagers' mad dashes toward safety. Their screams still echo in his ears.

This is his first time back in Mr. Melzer's classroom and he can't help but consider all the events that led him here. All the practices, the SEALs training, the extra reps. How he never expected to coach and yet became one. How his friend's death shook him and led him home. How he took a job nobody wanted and showed a team and a school what might be possible. How he found himself at the center of the three biggest epidemics in modern-day America, confronting poverty and opioid addiction and gun violence, all before he turned 27. Heavy stuff.

He draws a direct line from all of that to the calamity he prevented. Kelly does too. "Keanon's preparation for what happened," he says, "has been ingrained in him for a long, long time."

Lowe brushes off any talk about his being a hero. He doesn't feel like one. "It still doesn't seem real," he says. "I was there for a reason, at the right time. I truly believe my entire life prepared me for that moment, not to flinch."

The day after the shooting that never happened, Lowe returned to Parkrose to watch security tape of the incident, analyzing it like game cutups. He matched the footage from the hallway with his own time line, noting that while he went into the wrong classroom, Granados-Diaz exited the bathroom. As Lowe entered Mr. Melzer's room, Granados-Diaz lumbered down the hallway, holding his shotgun the way a solider might, with both hands. And as Lowe asked where Granados-Diaz might be, the boy opened the door right next to him. On the footage you can eventually see them both spill back into the hallway before Lowe wrestles the shotgun away.

"I never thought about my life," Lowe says. "This isn't heavy on my soul. The universe has been working with me for a long time."

He shrugs. "I was right where I was supposed to be." □

IONLOOP
AMERICA'S #1 SPORT BRACELET COMPANY
NEW
Cord SLIDE-knot Dash
Mega Negative Ions
Over 25 styles to choose from online!
Always Free Shipping
www.ionloop.com 800-255-8717

Made in USA Football Leather Wallet

The Rogue Front Pocket Wallet is shaped for your front pocket, where a wallet belongs.

Perfect for holding your fantasy league prize money. $55.

www.rogue-industries.com - 1-800-786-1768

CIGARS INTERNATIONAL
10 CIGARS + HUMIDOR
only $\$19^{99}$*
$\$160$ value!

www.CigarsIntl.com/SA7735
Enter the complete web address or search keyword: SA7735
1-888-244-2790
Mention code SA7735
Item #: CA62-SP

Includes 1 each of:
HC Series • Mark Twain • 5 Vegas
Amati • Ramón Bueso • Bahia
La Perla Habana • CAO • Gurkha
Toraño
• 40-Capacity Desktop Humidor

*Plus $\$4^{99}$ s/h. Purchase may be subject to state or local sales tax where applicable. We do not ship to South Dakota or Utah. First-time purchasers only. One per customer. No sales to anyone under the age of 21. For shipping information & restrictions please visit www.CigarsIntl.com/SHIP. Offer expires 10/15/19.

Unlike Your Dating App,

We Deliver a Perfect Match.

QUALITY ASSURANCE O.E.M. COLOR MATCH GUARANTEE

With over 300,000 custom-mixed formulas available in aerosol cans, paint pens, and ready-to-spray cans, we always deliver your perfect match.

Automotivetouchup.com
888-710-5192

ATLANTA
15
ATLANTA
6

FREQUENT FLIER

VINCE CARTER

BEFORE HE MAKES THE TRANSITION TO BROADCASTING, THE LEGENDARY DUNKER HAS ONE MORE THING TO DO: PLAY HIS NBA-RECORD 22ND SEASON

▸ INTERVIEW BY JACOB FELDMAN
MORE AT SI.COM

SI: How are you feeling about your upcoming farewell tour?
VC: It's going to be an emotional roller coaster. I know each day is going to be the last of something. Honestly, it's going to be awful. I don't even think I'll have fun. I just want to get into the season.

SI: Is it true you didn't let people measure your vertical leap?
VC: I get bashful. I've always been that way. I remember touching the top of the backboard in high school, and people were like, *Oh, do it again!* I'm like, *Eh, no.*

SI: What's it like going against Steph Curry after being a teammate of his father's?
VC: For a while it was kind of strange to look in the stands and see Dell and Sonya [Curry]. I remember when we all used to hang out. Steph and I used to play one-on-one before every home game in Toronto. He was always sitting on the side, dribbling, dribbling, going, *You ready? You ready!?* I look at Tim Hardaway Jr. the same way. Trey Mourning. Antonio Davis—his daughter Kaela is playing in Dallas. It's mind blowing.

SI: What do you do with your younger teammates, like 20-year-old Trae Young?
VC: We taught Trae how to play cards. These kids didn't know how to play [tongits], bourré, any of these things.

SI: Have they taught you to play *Fortnite*?
VC: Never ever. I've never even looked at it.

SI: You've already been doing some broadcasting. For a bashful guy, why the interest in media?
VC: I like coaching the game, but I don't want to coach. There's no loyalty, in my opinion, to coaches. But I can be a coach on air, helping viewers understand what they're seeing or how we see it as professional players.

SI: Are you as comfortable now at the desk as you are on the court?
VC: Mmhmmm. Yeah. I know where I can be in some years, but I'm comfortable with where I am because I know I've put a lot of work in. I can't tell you the last time I felt nervous.

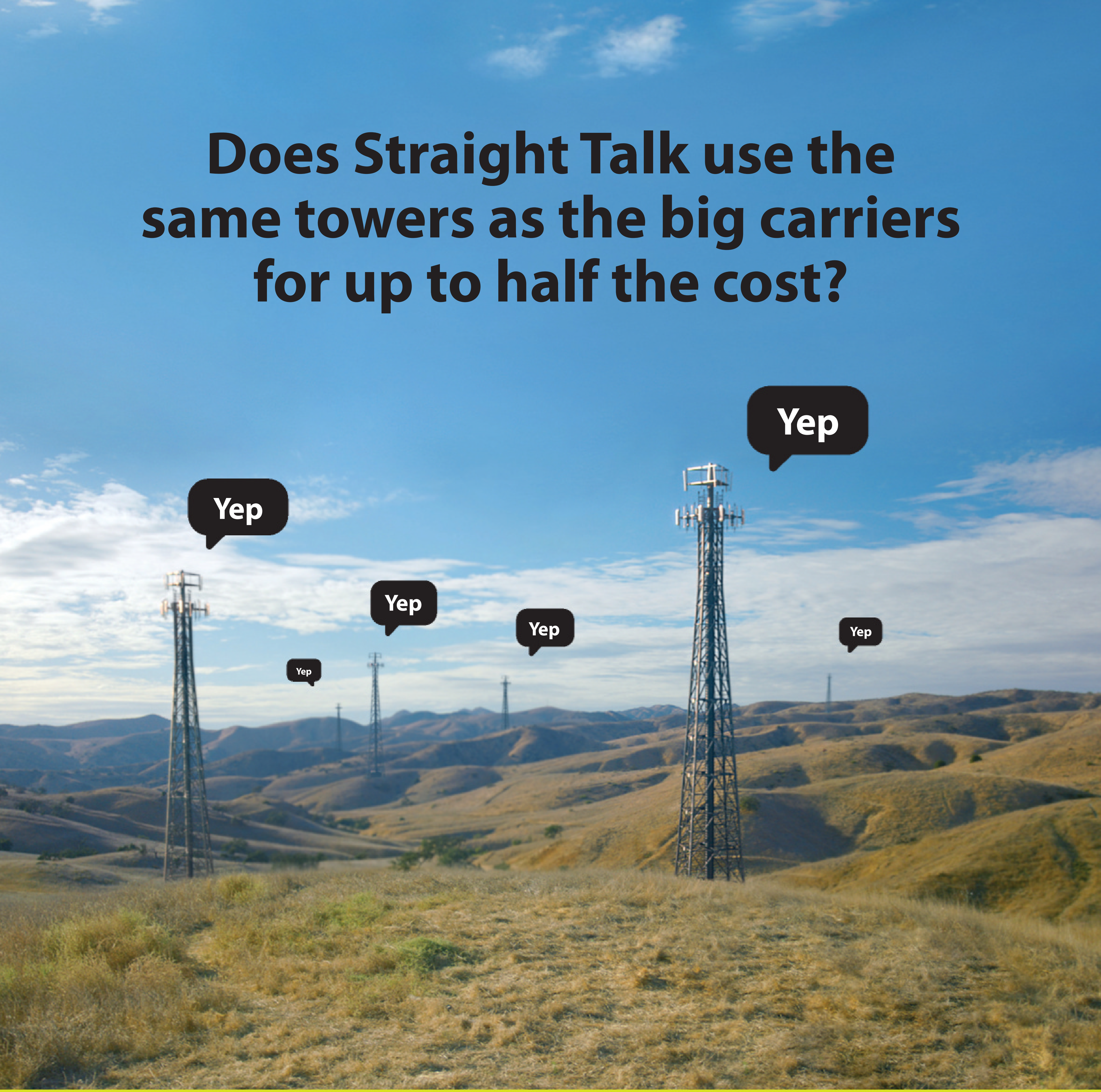
SI: You were a free agent this summer. Did you have any interest in a return to Toronto or the Nets?
VC: I'm not really one for the hype like that. I wanted to be on a team that wanted me. I'm thankful I can still get calls from 10 or 12 teams showing interest in me at 42, 43 years old.

SI: Might we see one more dunk contest?
VC: Yeah, if you pull it up on YouTube. The 2000 Dunk Contest, that's about it. I leave perfection where it is. □

BILL BAPTIST/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ISSN 0038-822X) IS PUBLISHED BIWEEKLY WITH AN EXTRA ISSUE IN MAY BY TI GOTHAM INC., A WHOLLY OWNED SUBSIDIARY OF MEREDITH CORPORATION, PRINCIPAL OFFICE: 225 LIBERTY ST, NEW YORK, NY 10281-1008. OWNED BY ABG-SI LLC, PRINCIPAL OFFICE: 1411 BROADWAY, 4TH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10018. PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID AT NEW YORK, NY, AND ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES. POSTMASTER: SEND ALL UAA TO CFS. (SEE DMM 507.1.5.2); NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: SEND ADDRESS CORRECTIONS TO SPORTS ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE P.O. BOX 37508, BOONE, IA 50037-0508. U.S. SUBSCRIBERS: IF THE POSTAL SERVICE ALERTS US THAT YOUR MAGAZINE IS UNDELIVERABLE, WE HAVE NO FURTHER OBLIGATION UNLESS WE RECEIVE A CORRECTED ADDRESS WITHIN TWO YEARS. CANADA POST PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40110178. GST #888381621RT001 YOUR BANK MAY PROVIDE UPDATES TO THE CARD INFORMATION WE HAVE ON FILE. YOU MAY OPT OUT OF THIS SERVICE AT ANY TIME. MAILING LIST: WE MAKE A PORTION OF OUR MAILING LIST AVAILABLE TO REPUTABLE FIRMS. IF YOU WOULD PREFER THAT WE NOT INCLUDE YOUR NAME, PLEASE CALL OR WRITE US. ©2019 ABG-SI LLC ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION IN WHOLE OR IN PART WITHOUT PERMISSION IS PROHIBITED. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ABG-SI LLC. CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SUBSCRIPTIONS: FOR 24/7 SERVICE, PLEASE USE OUR WEBSITE: WWW.SI.COM/CUSTOMERSERVICE YOU CAN ALSO CALL 1-800-843-8463 OR WRITE TO SI AT P.O. BOX 37508, BOONE, IA 50037-0508.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆


Does Straight Talk use the same towers as the big carriers for up to half the cost?
Yep
Yep
Yep
Yep
Yep
Yep

LARGEST, MOST DEPENDABLE
4G LTE†
NETWORKS

UNLIMITED
TALK, TEXT AND DATA
25GB UP TO 4G LTE† THEN 2G*
$45/mo
NO CONTRACT

It's time for some Straight Talk. With Straight Talk Wireless your phone runs on the same cell towers as the big carriers but for up to half the cost. Which means you get the same blistering fast 4G LTE† data and your phone works in more places, for a lot less. Find out more at StraightTalk.com

Straight Talk®
wireless

First 25GB at high speeds, then 2G.*

*Please refer to Terms and Conditions at StraightTalk.com. "Up to half the cost" is based on a comparison of the monthly cost of the $45 Straight Talk Unlimited Plan and the monthly cost of a comparable no-contract, single line plan with unlimited talk, text and data on the top two carriers. Excludes taxes, fees, autopay discounts and limited time pricing. Source: Competitor websites, April 2019. †Actual availability, coverage and speed may vary. LTE is a trademark of ETSI.

Only at Walmart

ALL THE ELECTROLYTES*

ZERO

SUGAR

ZERO SUGAR
ZERO SUGAR
G
ZERO
GATORADE
ZERO SUGAR THIRST QUENCHER
ORANGE

GET MORE OUT OF ZERO.

*Same electrolytes as regular Gatorade.
©2019 S-VC, Inc. GATORADE and the G BOLT Design are registered trademarks of S-VC, Inc.